

Full house

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 17, 2001](#) issue

When I travel to New York City, I like to stay in one of the guest rooms at General Seminary down in Chelsea. The twin bed sheets are polyester and the bathroom is down the hall, but at \$75 a night it may be the best deal in Manhattan. After spending at least that much on sushi and a theater ticket, I am mollified by walking up three flights of stairs to my humble lodgings.

An added bonus of staying at General is having access to the grounds, which are tended by a seminary horticulturist. The old quadrangle is surrounded on all sides by brownstone buildings designed in the early 1800s. Many of them are festooned with ivy, including the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, built in 1888. The last time I was there was exam week in December. My room key came with an invitation to use the oratory in Kohne Hall, open 24 hours a day. One early Saturday evening I decided to find it, and set off around the quadrangle with a map in my hand.

The first open door was to a building next to the chapel. I pulled it open and found myself standing in a wood-paneled foyer with memorial plaques and photographs on the walls. Straight ahead of me I saw another open door to a room that looked like a sacristy. Then I heard a voice and looked to my left. Through a small glass pane mounted in a door, I could see a service going on inside the chapel.

The priest's head and shoulders were framed by the window. He was fully vested, with a blue brocade chasuble over his white alb. Candles burned on the altar behind him, illuminating a magnificent alabaster reredos full of saints and angels. Since it was a weekend, I could not figure out what I was seeing. Was it a wedding? Was it some special feast day I had forgotten about? I decided to go around to the entrance of the chapel where I could get a better look.

When I arrived, I looked into that cavernous space and counted exactly three people: the celebrant, a vested lector and a woman kneeling in a pew with her head down. The lector was saying the prayers of the people in full voice, while the other two responded just as audibly. I felt as if I had walked in on a dress rehearsal. All that was missing was the congregation.

Late for a dinner date, I stepped back out onto the sidewalk, where I finally saw the sign. Holy Eucharist is celebrated daily in the chapel. Morning prayer is said every weekday morning, and evening prayer or evensong every night. All told, 21 worship services take place in the chapel every week, whether anyone but the officiant is there or not. While a congregation might benefit from participating in the prayers, the services are not for them. The services are for God. As long as God is present, the show goes on, and the house is always full.

After years of planning services designed to fill pews, I was in need of this reminder. When was the last time I had chosen a hymn because I believed that God would like it? When had I worked with a lector for however long it took to make sure that God's word was read with clarity and power, even if no one but God heard it? When had I said no to the softball coach, the women's guild, the stewardship team, the Christian education committee? "No, we're not stopping for announcements today. We're going to worship God straight through."

As a believer in the word made flesh, I do not need to be reminded that God is present in community. That has always been my starting point, the reason why I work hard to make worship gratifying for those who attend. But I wonder if that work does not backfire sometimes, by fooling those same people into thinking that they are the chief ones to be pleased by their worship.

I remember showing up to celebrate the Eucharist one Wednesday at noon shortly after Christmas. The lector that day was a former Roman Catholic priest named Bernard who was still shy around the altar. We discussed the service as I vested, then waited in the sacristy for the sound of feet on the chapel floor. After the clock struck 12 we waited five more minutes just in case, but no one ever came.

"Do you want to cancel?" Bernard asked me.

"I don't think so," I said, although my hands were starting to sweat. In the absence of a congregation, there could be no mistake about whom the service was for. Bernard looked as timid as I felt. "Will you come inside the altar rail and say the service with me?" I asked him, and he nodded.

For the next 30 minutes we were the church. We praised God's holy name. We proclaimed God's word. We interceded on behalf of the living and the dead, and we confessed the sins of the whole world. After we had received absolution, we exchanged God's peace. Then we broke bread and fed each other from God's table.

After it was all over we returned in silence to the sacristy. We both knew that there was no sense trying to talk about it, so Bernard put on his coat, hugged me and left. I hung up my alb and turned to fill in the service book. Everything was obvious except "Number Present." I knew that "2" was right, but it did not seem true. I would have written " ∞ " if I had thought I could get away with it. I finally settled on "3," to include the Invisible One whose presence is all that really counts.