

Something to offer

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The Stephens are late again. We've finished the welcome and the children's message, the first hymn and prayers, the Kyrie and Gloria when the Stephens finally come through the narrow door of the hundred-year-old church.

They try to be quiet. They tiptoe in their boots, children first and then parents. They choose the back row, their usual spot in the pew on the right. It is not secured to the old wooden floor, so it rocks and shakes. The floor groans and complains as they move down along the pew aisle.

I pause and then read the scripture. I preach the sermon. We sing another hymn.

As I sit staring out at this, my new congregation, I wonder if I can possibly stay here. I'm no match for them--and this is an arranged marriage. I started as a supply pastor. Now I'm the interim pastor. The congregation was recently stung by the loss of a greatly loved minister, followed by a series of poorly matched leaders.

Likewise, I've experienced a pretty deep loss. Before I came to this rural congregation, I served for more than a decade at a wealthy mountain ski resort an hour away. It is a place of elevated expectations and

exciting new developments, and I was an integral part of church life there. I felt like I was doing important things, significant things, that would change the church and its mission.

Now I'm in a river valley where change seems ponderously slow. The people don't seem to expect much--and so far, I haven't offered them much of myself.

The prayers of the people begin. The Stephens' pew in the back starts to thump.

Not again.

I see ten-year-old Mallory at the end of the pew by the wall. She has gotten up and crossed over the legs of her brother, sister, mom and dad. She arrives at the aisle and heads out the door.

As I hand the offering baskets to the ushers, I see Mallory return. She is carrying a large cooler, holding the handle with both hands--elbows out--as she once again makes the journey. She crosses over the legs of the family again, but this time she is encumbered by the cooler. Everyone has to shift positions, and the entire congregation turns to look at her.

Honestly, what's next?

The Lord be with you. And also with you.

We share communion. The people return to their seats. We sing the sending song, and I walk down the aisle to the front door.

I'm ready to say my goodbyes and send the worshipers on their way when Mallory and her brother Luke appear and stand across from me. The cooler is large enough to obstruct the aisle.

Luke bends and opens the cooler, which is filled with cartons of eggs. He lifts a carton, and--with just the right amount of eight-year-old drama--opens it like a jewelry case and holds it up for me to see.

"Farm fresh eggs for sale," he says with a grin. "Our chickens are free range." He knows the lingo.

I look at the eggs, expecting uniform white pearls, a double strand of eggs in a row. But these eggs are like stones, stones of all shapes and sizes. Some are brown, some green, some aqua; some have dark spots. Some don't quite fit in their places. All together, they are beautiful.

"Farm fresh, you say?" Now I am grinning with Luke.

"Save two dozen for me."

I run back to the sacristy and get my wallet. It's a small moment, but it turns me just slightly toward the congregation. Perhaps we do have something to offer each other.