

1.

JESUS IS NOT YOUR BFF

This is not an easy chapter for me to write because I was raised Baptist. Well, I raised myself Baptist. It began when my mom owned a daycare and babysat two girls whose mom offered to take me to Vacation Bible School one summer. In my mind, it was magical. The people were so nice, there were snacks, and we learned about Jesus as this guy that loved me more than anything. He was my friend.

In the background of learning about Jesus, I was being sexually abused at home. The abuse began around the age of five, and it stopped when I was nine and started my period. While I don't have clear memories of most of what I experienced, both the clear and foggy memories are enough to make my breath stop as I type this.

Needless to say, as a child enduring that horror, I was looking for a savior. I can now say that what I was looking for in that savior was safety. My mom, who also had a difficult childhood, did the best she could as a single mother to keep me safe. It was her priority, and we butted heads on it a lot

of times, but as a middle-aged mother and grandmother, I now appreciate that my mother was always looking out for what was best for me. But I also know that we cannot always keep bad things from happening to our kids, no matter how much we try. The Jesus I was told about at Vacation Bible School was exactly the savior that I was looking for. A God who would die for me, love me, and take down my enemies while granting all my wishes. He was going to give me a dad and make my mom happy. He was going to make me behave. And man, everything about me that was inappropriate? Jesus was going to fix all that.

But he did not. After answering every altar call from the ages of eleven to thirteen, and I mean *every* one, I found that I still could not say yes when asked whether I was in a personal relationship with Jesus. I felt that if I did have that kind of relationship with him, I would not be so “bad.” And that is how I felt about myself, that I was bad and I needed a miracle to be good. I answered so many altar calls trying to get Jesus to “live in my heart” that the Baptists did the only thing they could think of: they baptized me twice. I have gone through the ritual many times—as a Catholic when I was a baby, and then twice as a Baptist, and once by Pentecostals. No amount of dunking and baptizing could fix me.

When I was twelve years old, I was standing by my best friend’s locker when the hottest boy I had ever seen walked down the hall. He was the new kid on the block and looked just like Donnie Wahlberg. I loved Stacey from the moment I first saw him. I wrote him love notes telling him he was going to marry me. He did not believe me. He was a young,

stupid teenage boy, and I was pretty much an outcast by that point. I was desperate for someone to love me and save me. I was an open target for bullying and people making fun of me. I was the most pitiful teen girl. Which meant that even though Stacey and I would find any moment to make out at the First Baptist Church in front of his house (God is good), he never wanted anyone to think that he was my boyfriend. That really hurt me. I felt like the loser I always felt like, but I kept making out with him because he was so cute and I loved him. We made plans to have sex for the first time, which would have happened except for the fact that I asked him if he would marry me and have kids with me if we did it. That stopped that entire situation pretty freakin' fast.

Everything we did up to that point, though, triggered me. I realized that I had done all of this before, and the flashbacks of what had happened to me as a child, memories that I had repressed and now had to face as if they had just happened, came back to me. Then, two days after the failed sex attempt, Stacey broke up with me and began dating my best friend. The triggers from my abuse, the betrayal of my friend, and the reality that Stacey did not love me created the perfect storm. I began to run away for days at a time. I started sneaking out of the house and sleeping with a man in his twenties. Within months, I had slept with half a dozen guys, some of them adults and some my age, all of them benefiting from my desperate need to be loved. The only way that I had been taught to be loved was to let someone use my body.

I could not understand why nobody loved me. We were told at the First Baptist Church that if Jesus lived in our hearts, then we would not have sex outside of marriage, so it seemed to me that even Jesus didn't want to love me. The chastity talks I heard at youth group told us that girls who have sex are used gum but did not tell us that boys who use girls are assholes. It was not a good message for anyone, let alone a young girl who had been groomed and sexually abused as a child. It is not easy to explain all the internal messages that you end up with after that happens to you at such a young age. It wasn't something I knew how to vocalize to anyone, but the messages I was getting about chastity only made me more confused, not more chaste.

At fourteen I decided that if I was used gum, I was just going to go my way. I was not going to be an atheist, but I was not going to church anymore. Jesus had made it clear that he was not OK with me; after all, I had gotten nothing that I wished for. My confused idea of sex, the abuse I had suffered as a child, and my belief that Jesus was not my best friend but was still God all created this illusion that I was not good enough to be in church. And so I left.

The last time I ran away I spent days in a mobile home with a boy. We had sex the entire time with the Eagles playing on a loop. To this day, I refuse to live in a mobile home ever or listen to that Eagles album. This boy did not hurt me or manipulate me, but he did use me. He got off on having me do whatever he asked. All I wanted was someone to be nice to me. When he was done with me, he sent me home. And I had to walk. I cried as I walked down the highway

because I did not understand why, after everything I had done to get that boy to love me, he had sent me away like nothing. A high school boy who lived along that highway saw me and told me I could use his phone to call someone to get me. I followed him, and before I knew it, I was in a barn bent over a bale of hay being raped instead of on the phone getting a ride. He said that I could tell anyone I wanted but nobody would believe me because everyone knew how easy I was. He was not wrong.

That was what broke me. I got back on the highway, and I just wanted to disappear. I did not see any way forward in my life. At the moment when I was at my most hopeless, a truck pulled up behind me. When I looked back, it was my Tio Roy. I looked awful after days of not eating or showering. There was nobody I wanted to see less than that man. He was the father I never had, and I was terrified of disappointing him. But as much as I didn't want him to see me like that, I also did not have the guts to run away. I jumped in his truck, and he asked, "What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you doing this?" I just told him everything. From start to finish without leaving anything out. About what happened to me as a child, how Jesus did not live in my heart, and everything with Stacey. I even told him about what had happened in the barn right before he found me. Before I knew it, we were pulling up to his house. He told me to go in and let my Tia know that I was staying with them.

My Tia Mary told me to take a bath, and she gave me something to wear from one of my oldest cousins. She fed me, and I went to sleep. When I woke up, all my things were

there, and the next day I was enrolled in a new school. Years later, I would hear that my Tio showed up at my house with his shotgun and said that he was taking me and my things and told the man who had abused me that if he ever came near me again that he would regret it. For once in my life, someone kept me safe. When I was grown and my Tio was dying, all I kept thinking was that I was losing my hero. I am so lucky that when he was first diagnosed with prostate cancer, I was able to write him a letter telling him how he saved me and how much I loved him. My gift of writing gave me the ability to express to him how much he meant to me.

Not long after I moved in with my Tio Roy and Tia Mary, my mom left our house and came to get me. Eventually we ended up in Amarillo, Texas, which was very far from Three Rivers, where I had grown up. I did not want to move at all. Within a year, at only sixteen, I was pregnant with my oldest son. When he was almost three years old, I married my first husband, had a miscarriage, and then quickly birthed three more kids. When Ben and I got divorced, I moved to Austin. In 2008, I received a message from none other than Stacey Adams. He was in Iraq and was also divorced. I had just caught Ben doing drugs again, so even though we were divorced, this time our relationship was really over.

When Stacey came home, we moved to the Austin suburbs in July of 2008. I wanted him to marry me, so I began RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—the same move I made when I was pregnant with Anthony. I never had any intention of actually becoming Catholic; I just

wanted to marry my childhood sweetheart. God is hilarious. This RCIA class was taught by a man named Noe Rocha. I thought he was nice enough, but I was sure that nothing bad had ever happened to him because he worked for the Church and church people, in my experience, had everything good. Turned out that Noe used to be addicted to heroin. And on top of that, he had had plenty of bad things happen to him. He also talked about Jesus like he knew him. I wanted that. And that was when God hooked me.

Throughout my conversion, I encountered a different Jesus than the one preached in my childhood. Jesus was not fluffy. He called out Pharisees. He spoke frankly. He was not this best friend kind of softy that I had thought he was. He talked about hell—not in a threatening way, but in a way that was realistic. We have choices and those choices have consequences; some consequences are eternal. That was the hell Jesus talked about. With my past, I had to find the balance between what was done to me and what I could do to process it and heal from it, because being angry and bitter was not helping me or my children at all. Holding on to all that pain was killing me. God understands what trauma is and how we make choices out of those wounds, but he also gives us tools to help heal us.

Having my Tio and Tia in my life set me up very well to understand how God could be both merciful and just. It is not one or the other but both at the same time. When I was stopped for driving while intoxicated in 2007, my Tio and Tia were both there for me. But both of them expected me to get my act together. Both of them held me accountable for

my actions while also making it clear to me that they would always love me. I tried to do the same thing for my children, and when I converted to Catholicism, it was easy for me to understand that God has rules. They were not rules for the sake of controlling me, but rules to keep me safe. My entire life I had been seeking that kind of safety while making choices that hurt me because I did not understand how the rules kept me safe. In the same way, I did not understand that my mother was trying to keep me safe by telling me not to do things that she knew would hurt me. I thought she was being mean and unfair when, really, she was just trying to protect me. Once I realized that the “rules” are not rules at all but are God’s way of saying, “This will hurt you,” I came to understand that the safety I had been seeking all my life was right in front of me. No human being can give it to me; it only comes in trusting God and believing that he does in fact love me and want good things for me.

Because I now have this understanding that God will never not love me, I can show up in prayer honestly with Jesus. I am safe to be myself and be honest with him. Jesus gets my sense of humor; he gets why I do not think cussing is as big of a deal as someone else does; and he delights in me, not because I am like this person or that person but because I am me and he loves me just as I am.

Jesus is so much more than a best friend. He is Love and Justice and Mercy. Everything he is is ordered to justice. Trusting in that is how I forgive the man who abused me and how I trust God with Anthony’s soul. Because I know that in the end, I am safe.

2.

SHEEP ARE DUMB

When I was coming into the Church, one day my favorite priest was talking to the kids about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He said that the Bible calls us sheep so often because sheep are dumb. Jesus knew this. Sheep wander off and get lost, they are eaten by predators, and they need to be protected. It is the love of a shepherd that keeps them safe and sound. A lot of modern-day shepherds also use guard dogs who live with the sheep and keep them safe from predators. I think of our guardian angels as sort of like God's guard dogs.

After hearing Fr. J talk about sheep and how they are so dumb, I became obsessed. I badly wanted to see a herd of sheep, but not just any herd of sheep: I wanted to see a herd that had a shepherd. I live in central Texas, and when I first heard that story, I lived in the suburbs. The lack of herds of sheep led by shepherds was real.

In March of 2010, when Stacey and I were living together, we tried to elope in Rome as if it was the Catholic Vegas. Spoiler: it is not Catholic Vegas, especially during

Lent, which is when we were visiting. The guy behind the window of the marriage license office almost fell out of his chair when we said we wanted to get married but we didn't have a letter from a priest and, even worse, I did not have any of my sacraments other than Baptism. He thought it was a great joke. We were such bad Catholics that we didn't get the punch line.

On our last day in Rome we went for a walk by our hotel, which was located on the outskirts of the city. We did not want to stay in the touristy part of Rome, so we had picked a hotel that was nestled in a neighborhood. On our last full day there, we decided to go on an adventure walking around the Roman countryside. We left the main street and ended up passing fields, including one that had a cute donkey that let us pet him. Soon we were on a cobblestone road walking past Romans on their own crisp Sunday stroll. It was the most gorgeous day.

As we were walking down the road, I saw a cloud of white moving off to the side and wondered aloud what it could be. As we got closer, the cloud came into focus, and soon I could see that it was a flock of sheep heading right toward us. Before we could register what was happening, we were surrounded by white sheep. Big sheep and little sheep, followed closely by a really old shepherd. He looked like he had come out of a time machine with his satchel and wooden staff. The sheep were jumping around, playing with each other, and there was something about them that made me freeze in amazement. When I saw the smirk on the shepherd's face, I realized that it looked familiar: it was the