

I am excited and grateful to be here to worship again and to have the privilege of being a witness to the power and presence of God through Emmanuel Presbyterian Church. I now live and work in Boston but return to thank God and thank you for the incredible blessing I received as an attendee and member here during my years as an undergrad down the street.

A few stories illustrate how Emmanuel has truly been Emmanuel – God’s presence among us – in Morningside Heights.

- 1) When the planes collided with the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001, I was a first-year in my second week of classes, and in retrospect, I can see how Emmanuel was divinely poised to respond. Although the church was younger and renting a Sunday afternoon property, Emmanuel was present and effective in responding to the events of the day, and even in preparing the congregation for them, through special inspiration and grace.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, the sermon that Charlie preached two days before September 11<sup>th</sup> was prophetic. I recently found the audio cassette of that sermon from September 9<sup>th</sup>, and listened to it to discover that Charlie had just preached about themes miraculously relevant to the week ahead. He spoke about how fragile our lives are -- that they can seemingly “fall apart” with one circumstantial change. We heard about our capacity to great anger and sin (like that of Moses), our desperate need for God’s grace, and our need to repent of our attitudes of entitlement. Charlie also spoke about suffering – how pain can be the gracious “shout” of God to open our ears and eyes, in order to experience His Grace in the particulars of life; yet he also reminded us that God is not vindictive when he allows us to suffer.

I will never forget walking into Columbia’s campus on the eerie evening of September 11th and seeing Charlie standing outside, near the steps, surrounded by a group of students and pedestrians, engaged in a question and answer session. I can’t recall the details of his words in the blur of the memory of that day, but what resonates still was Emmanuel -- the unquestionable presence of the Holy Spirit on Columbia’s campus through Charlie and the church -- offering Hope beyond ourselves, freedom from Fear and a response to the “why” of suffering. I also remember that Charlie’s ability to be in Manhattan on that day was itself the hand of the Lord, as he had an unexpected change in travel plans. The sermon that he offered the following week to a crowded audience was one that I have replayed and recommended to others in times of crisis.

- 2) In the four years that followed, Emmanuel continued to be Light and Salt in Morningside Heights to the students, artists, and other professionals and families whom I got to know. The church body and Reverend Drew engaged with us in our daily lives. In preaching, scripture was always translated into the human, earthly, gritty context of our heart attitudes toward realities of work, studies, relationships, sexual morality, and our tendencies toward individualism and pride. Rarely could I sit through a service at Emmanuel without chills spreading up and down my spine, unlike anywhere else that I’d worshipped before or since, with the deep sensation of the Spirit’s presence during church services and musical offerings. The combination of conviction of my great need for God and His forgiveness, which I could receive at the altar each

week, brought me to the cross and sustained my faith during periods of doubt and feelings of failure.

As a student leader involved in reaching Columbia's campus, Emmanuel provided real support and open arms to students who were wrestling with deep skepticism, hard questions, and philosophical debates in their classes and personal lives. Emmanuelites hosted home-cooked meals, one-on-one counseling, mentorship partners, and retreats where students were welcomed. Charlie Drew spoke to our campus fellowship about Shalom – the Kingdom of Heaven on earth – and invited us to join God's greater plan of redeeming creation and our society. He also accepted the invitation to an Inter-faith panel at Columbia with representatives from the Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i student organizations; he spoke lovingly and clearly in the midst of the spiritual warfare and confusion that was palpable in the room, and he shared graciously with other panelists of his time to speak, even though it had been reduced to a small fraction of the promised allotment.

Throughout its ministry, Emmanuel has provided a haven for those of us in need of a place to ask seemingly unanswerable questions. One friend and fellow student at Columbia was struggling after a hospitalization for mental health concerns, and was very wary of organized religion and the church in general; while she wasn't comfortable in coming regularly to church, she very readily accepted invitations from pastoral staff to meet for honest discussions, and she started studying jazz with one of the worship team leaders, while continuing to wrestle with her doubts. Recently, she has started to heal from her wounds and to attend a local church, and she wrote to me this week of a keen awareness that "God [is] changing my heart one day at a time." Indeed, the seeds that are planted and watered at Emmanuel are growing, by God's grace.

As the church body invested in us sacrificially, Emmanuel also challenged us, even as short-term members of the church, to radical commitment, just as Christ calls us. As students, we were welcomed and even encouraged to become members, to join the choir, to teach children's church, prepare communion, to set up chairs, and in so doing, to experience the life, work, and joy of the family of Christ. We were challenged to share Christ in the classroom, to integrate His Truth into our lives, and to engage our whole bodies and minds in the worship and pursuit of His glory on earth – whether in the lab, on stage, or in private devotion.

In these and so many other ways, I am indebted and immensely grateful for the ministry and gift of worshipping and experiencing redemption as a student here. I'll continue to send every New Yorker I meet your way, and to rejoice in the life of Emmanuel, here in the City.