

## **From Battered to Loved**

Firstly, in order to effectively communicate the impact GSP has had in my life, I need to provide a little context of where I came from, spiritually speaking. I was raised Roman Catholic, and very involved in the church growing up, however our inner family life was full of dysfunction and abuse. When I left the home and joined the military I was looking for something that would give me the loving family I always yearned for. It was there I found my now ex-husband, his family, and their fundamentalist, charismatic, evangelical very cult-ish church. I fell in love with their lifestyle and thought it would lead to the loving environment I was looking for.

I bought into the church and patriarchal theology 100%, and spent almost every day of the week doing something for the church. Weekly you could find us "street preaching" against the strip clubs or gay bars in downtown Tampa, FL. We would show end times movies and perform "Christian concerts" in flea markets and parks with free food as outreaches. We hosted people in our home for meals and fellowship multiple times a week. I thought I was doing important work to help "save" people from eternal damnation and their sins here on earth.

Although we were spending a lot of time at church, my marriage was suffering. However, when we tried to get marriage counseling, it was always me who needed to change, and wait and pray for God to move on my husband. I then realized that the church I belonged to valued the appearance of holiness over true conversion of the heart. I began to see that my husband was using religion to control me, and manipulate me into doing things that I didn't want to do, but at the same time not being accountable for his actions. I had traded my domestic abuse of my childhood for spiritual abuse. And I also realized that it just didn't make sense to "reach out" to people and try to "bring them to Jesus" by judging them with hateful words through a bullhorn.

We decided to move to Tucson. The abuse and neglect only got worse, the spiritual counseling I got from the family life pastor was that I should lose weight for my husband, and his wife told me that other wives she helps counsel go through worse things than me and still stay faithful to the church, and, in contrast, my ex was being disciplined to become a pastor. I realized that waiting and hoping and praying that my husband would change wasn't a realistic solution, and that I needed to set boundaries and limitations on the amount of abuse I would accept. Eventually I moved out.

I went a year of not having a church, a year of questioning the existence of God, of examining things I once believed, and just going through the wreckage. I came to the realization that not having the answers is ok, and that I did want to go to church to have a community.

So I decided to check GSP out. I had told myself that the theology really didn't matter to me, as long as it was inclusive, but I was lying. The first sermon I listened to was VERY INCLUSIVE and VERY SOCIAL JUSTICE. It definitely piqued my interest, and I decided to attend an Episcopal 101 class that was meeting after. What made an impression is that the Episcopal Church is for thoughtful rebels, where questioning is welcomed. I SO APPRECIATE THAT.

Everything went well--but that scared me. I didn't want to be in the same position I was in before, getting sucked in, only to realize the rotten core after spending so much time and energy. I didn't want to fall under the control of the power of personality. I didn't want to get burned. So I waited a few weeks, and came back on Easter.

Easter service was FUN. We threw confetti from plastic eggs in the air, and I realized that GSP had a lighter side too. And that made me happy, so I decided that I would scope it out over the summer and test it out. I liked it, especially the music. I never felt pressure in any way to conform and I never felt put-upon or obligated to do or give anything. I was able to relax, and able to begin what I call my spiritual rehabilitation.

During my time here at GSP I was able to work through my social anxiety due to the many people who invited me to spend time with them at lunch after Sunday service, and for dinner after choir practice. Those people loved me through my awkward silences, and made me feel welcome and that I mattered.

Another meaningful situation that really helped heal my heart was being involved in Eric and Richard's wedding. I had become extremely ashamed of my participation in street harassment and extreme prejudice of people who are in the LGBTQ community, and being able to help them with the wedding prep and sing in their wedding service was so touching, and powerful.

In the choir I found self expression, acceptance and a way to celebrate many cultures through the diverse musical selections we sing. I have made good friends with people who care for me, and I know would help me if I ever needed it.

GSP and its members have helped me become a more loving, confident, and spiritually and emotionally healthy person. I can truly say that I would not be ready to take on this next part of my life without the love and support of the people I have met at this church. It makes me sad to leave the place that took me in battered and bruised, and loved me till I was well, and then gave me a place to belong. I truly hope to return in the future.