



## Circles and STARS

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**M**y nephew was baptized on Sunday wearing a christening dress that my great-grandmother made and has been worn by members of my family for the past 50 years. My extended family gathered outside our church, which is undergoing a multi-million dollar restoration to repair damage done in a Civil War bombing, an 1886 earthquake and a 1989 hurricane. Outside the church is a temporary fence and the construction company's trailer. As we entered, we had to cross over a wooden walkway and duck our heads under a temporary tunnel. There is scaffolding inside the building, some of the stained glass windows have been temporarily removed, and canvas hangs to lessen the dust. The effect when we walked in was a darkened church, a church that seemed quieter and more serious. On this day, for my nephew's baptism, my extended family took up the first three pews. My sister and brother-in-law were in the first pew, then my husband, our boys, my dad and stepmom in the second pew, and my mom, stepdad, aunt and cousin in the last pew. From the outside we looked like a homogenous group, but sitting in the inside all I could see were our differences.

The kids sat patiently through the prayers and singing, mesmerized by their front row seats and the actions of the holy men and women. When it was time for the baptism, we stood and followed Father Michael to the back of the church and the bowl of holy water. As we walked down the aisle, I was reminded of my wedding day and the way my new husband and I almost ran down the aisle into the sunlight of the beautiful May evening. We walked slowly with more seriousness now, and I looked behind me to see my family moving in single file. The choir sang and the congregation watched silently, smiling as we passed.

My extended family hasn't been gathered together since the last baptism three years ago. Before my sister and I started having babies and the baptisms began, it was weddings and college graduations that brought this group together. I graduated from high school soon after my parents got divorced and remember looking out at the audience and wanting to run and hide. There was my mom seated off to one side with her parents, my dad on the other side with his parents, and my sister stuck in the middle. It was terrible. As soon as it was over I packed my bags

for college and headed west. In the meantime, Mom remarried and moved to the South, and the make-up of our family shifted like the church's steeple from the earthquake. I was relieved when Dad couldn't afford to come to my college graduation and I only had to manage the awkwardness and fragile alliances of my newly blended step-family.

My wedding was the first time both sides of the family were together again. Dad was now remarried and I had a new group of strangers that were suddenly my step-somethings, more people I had nothing in common with except that their mother lived with my father. I stood on the second floor of the church and looked out the window to watch the guests arrive. This was before the restoration and the stained-glass windows sent rainbows of color throughout the sanctuary. The altar was dripping in flowers arranged by dedicated volunteers, golds and whites just like my dress. I felt like a princess as I stood and looked out the window. But I worried, too, about where everyone would sit and who I would talk to first. I was a new bride, filled with love, wanting to believe that a marriage could last forever, but I was surrounded by second marriages and step-siblings. Instead of a family circle, we were a star with sharp edges pointing off in different directions.

By the time my sister got married, the blending of our family was less awkward. We had a map to follow; we'd done this before and were less cautious with each other. Walking down the aisle as a maid of honor this time, I worried less over who was talking to whom and where everyone would sit. Dad's toast was funny, and there was enough beer for everyone. When my first child was born, our step-somethings were no longer strangers but a permanent part of the changing shape of our family. As the first grandchild, Will created names for his various grandparents and the word "step" disappeared from our vocabulary. At his baptism, different sides of the family sat together and chatted, and our family felt less like a star and more like an octagon. When my second child was born I saw that our family was not a fixed shape, that the way it was once was not the way it would always be and that introducing new members didn't mean letting go of the old. It was like the childhood song, "make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other's gold."

The beauty that captured me on my wedding day was muted as we stood at the back of the church to witness the baptism. Bunched around my nephew and the minister, we watched as he traced the baby's face with holy water. We were quiet as we stood around the dusty edges of the temporary stage, bunched together by the scaffolding, no longer distracted by the beauty of a building. I looked up at everyone to see that we were standing in a circle, and it felt like a family from the inside.