3/1/20

First Church Amherst Fieldnotes Part 3

As I entered the church for the third time, I was met with the routine “hello” and “how are you” from a variety of the churchgoers. Making my way to my seat, I overheard a group of three women discussing what their children were giving up for Lent: soda, video games, dessert. In accordance with the start of Lent, the service revolved around gratitude, prayer, and repentance. Despite the existence of Lent as a period of sacrifice and penance, Pastor Vicki’s words were soothing and non-judgmental, with an emphasis on optimism and kindness as a method of connecting with God.

Looking around, the bibles tucked into each pew were inconspicuous in their assertiveness. Not many of the attendees used them, instead reciting the prayers and songs from memory. The few who did reach for the bibles settled them comfortably in their laps, running their fingers across the fragile, leaf-like pages. Picking one up myself, I was hands were greeted by a pleasant weightiness. The thick black leather gave way to the embossed title, “Holy Bible.” Regardless of their lack of use, the presence of the bibles was evident. As representatives of divinity, principles, and morality, the bibles echoed within the space, demanding attention. The woman sitting beside me stroked the spine of her bible. Closing her eyes, she caressed the cover, succumbing willingly to the power that it had over her.

The church capitalizes on this very agency of object. Bibles, rosaries, crosses. They all magnify one’s devotion to God. They stimulate emotion, captivating their users, locking individuals into a cycle of faith and appreciation. Interestingly, their power is not hidden and there is not blatant intention to deceive. Openly gesturing to the towering cross that hangs on the wall behind her, Pastor Vicki implored the attendees to “acknowledge God. Love Her. Thank Her.” Because ‘God’ cannot be felt tangibly, He/She exists within objects, within the essence of the church itself.

Towards the end of the service, the collection plate was passed around. It is made of metal, heavy and cool to the touch, shallow yet broad. Dollar bills whispered as they flutter into the plate. A few people even take a moment to write checks. As the plate moved closer and closer to me, I found myself sweating. I felt the unspoken obligation to contribute like a weight on my chest. The woman beside me turned towards me, offering the plate. Observing the glaring pile of money before me, I quickly seized the plate and passed it to the next person. Like all the rest, they provide a donation happily. The expectation to donate may not arise from the plate itself, but its very structure craves monetary donations. Empty, the plate looks dejected and old. But full, its wide form satisfied, it appears contented and relaxed. Whether or not the churchgoers recognize or acknowledge the agency of the objects around them, these objects have power, and we succumb to that power.