

The Rev. Dr. Elaine Caldbeck
Rector, St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Biography

Not unlike the Chinese curse, I enjoy and struggle with living an interesting life. My nickname in college was "chainsaw" because I was a forestry major who worked for the United States Forest Service as a management trainee. Apparently, being female, 5'3" and able to fell trees with a chainsaw was amusing to some. For 20-year-old me, it was just part of working outdoors and developing interests begun in Girl Scouts. Of course, as one of the first women hired by the Forest Service under affirmative action, it could be, at times, quite a challenge.

The person who created my nickname was the Rector of the Episcopal Parish of Ames, Iowa, for whom I worked as a peer minister to college students. Delivering meals-on-wheels, answering a 24-hour help line and being the on-call acolyte for daily church services tested my mettle. As did knocking on the doors of fellow students to invite them to church activities. These formative experiences began to open my mind and spirit to understanding myself as called to be an Episcopal priest.

My life is framed with by the tensions between loving the out-of-doors, valuing science and being drawn to the holiness of prayer, liturgy and service. I've been a forester, a Wild and Scenic River planner, a seminary librarian and in my late father's words, a perpetual student. Though by now, my degree earning days seem long ago. Beyond camping and hiking, my study and teaching passions usually relate to American religious history, with an emphasis on social movements, women and ordination, civil rights, gender studies and the diversity of religions in our nation.

Somewhere in my family DNA is a passion for standing with and for those that society would prefer to ignore or discard. Something about my Great-grandfather who was a gypsy, who stood up for the rights of the downtrodden and ran a brewery in downtown Des Moines. Yes, life is full of contrasts.

For me, being church is about all of us being in relationship with one another. Building a community in which it is safe enough to be vulnerable, by respectfully honoring the dignity of each person. This allows us to share faith and the love of God in the midst of disagreements, with all the complexity of our times, through honest discussion. A bishop I once knew said that a good strong congregation is messy, rangy and complicated. That is, people care enough about one another to listen, offer varied opinions and out of the synergy of their varied viewpoints create something better than any one of them could do alone.

Beyond that, I grew up in Urbandale, Iowa, and have lived in Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, and Evanston, IL. In the last few years, I returned to Iowa, to be near friends, family and a culture I hold dear.