

Good Morning (evening)! Allow me to introduce myself. (PAUSE) I know what you're thinking. (PAUSE) You already know who I am. (SMILE) But that is where you're wrong. I'm not Georgia Atkinson. I may look like Georgia Atkinson, but for a long time I have not felt like Georgia. I am Alex Atkinson. Wow! That feels so good to say out loud. When I was born, I was given the name Georgia by my biological mother. From the time I finally met her, at the age of twelve onwards, I realized more and more that I did not identify with her and her values. It got to the point where I didn't even want the name she had given me, and so, just this week, I legally changed my name to Alex.

What is it about mothers that make them so influential in our lives? It can be as simple as naming us, or as complicated as adopting us and raising us as their own. And then there's the whole idea of parenting in community. I want to talk about how two hundred mothers have got me where I am today, a newly minted young adult.

Being an only child of a priest, I have had the unique experience of being "shared" with her congregations. This is especially true at St. Paul's where I have done most of my growing up. So while I have had to share my mother with you all, you have very lovingly shared your parenting with me. You could say my faith journey has played out on a public platform because so much of what I have done to become closer to God I have done here in this community. For example, my participation in March for Our Lives, General Convention -- first working in the daycare center, and this year as a member of the Official Youth Presence, with Kids for Peace, City Reach, Family Promise, plus the various sponsored walks I have asked you to support, I have been inspired and upheld by my church family.

As many of you know, I've had the chance to travel to many places in my short life, including a month last summer in Australia where I babysat for my Godmother's kids. My Godmother Jenny is my mother's goddaughter. And now I am the Godmother to Jenny's son Tom. I believe that this is the circle of life that God intends. Think about baptism, and how the priest asks us to promise to help raise the newly baptized in the church family. We live out that promise every time we help a kid put on his shoes, or admire her drawing, or listen when a young person has a question or a problem. We do even more of this when we're asked to be godparents: parents who love someone else's kid as God would want us to love, without judgment and with a forgiving heart. By the way, when I was on a side trip to Fiji last summer, our tour guide asked me if I was getting married anytime soon. I said no and he said that when I was ready to get married, he would sell me a pig for only \$600, discounted from \$1,000. (PAUSE) In an ideal world, we all help each other, especially the ones who come after us.

You have watched me grow and change over the years just like my parents have. It is a gradual process with ups and downs and lessons learned. However, there are parents who don't get to experience the natural process of separation at all in this way. When I was at General Convention, I heard a speech given by the bereaved family of a victim of the Margery Stoneman Douglas shooting. They turned their family tragedy into an opportunity to influence voters to change the gun laws in this country but that was only after going through a terrible, painful grieving process. Or I think about our field trip to the Hutto immigration detention center in Taylor, Texas. As we formed a prayer vigil outside of the building, I could see through narrow windows n little hands waving notes at us; these were mothers who had been wrenched from their children and were

wanting desperately to somehow make contact. These are stark examples of the separation process gone wrong, that can so badly damage families for whole lifetimes.

But my story is about evolving into the young adult you see before you. I have been able to lean on nurturers of all kinds as I have made my way through my formative years. This has been the case at several parish churches, starting when I was first learning to walk, back in England, then in Nevada, and California. All along the way, I have been cared for and cared about by so many fellow Christians. This has made me a caring person myself, and I have developed this aspect of myself through visiting people in the hospital with my mom and working with the Sunday School and nursery here at church. This is a value I really do identify with; helping other people and making them feel heard and loved. When it comes to young people maturing into adults, I think the most important thing we can do as a parish family is to encourage them to “Sing aloud O daughter of Zion! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” It’s hard to know if the choices you are making are the right ones, but if you feel encouraged to take risks, or to approach a situation with confidence, there’s a better chance of things working out. And if they don’t work out, at least you have felt encouraged to try your best knowing that God has a big stake in your efforts.

Separating from parents is every teenager’s job. It is heartbreaking when it happens unlawfully, as in school shootings, or when our government makes an example of asylum seekers. But in my case, I have been able to make my own choices with the support of my parents and this community and I am beginning to really spread my wings now. I am asking for less help, and for more freedom, even at church, as I join the elders in nurturing the youngers.

So as Alex, the young adult, I want to thank you for being such a valuable part of my childhood. I feel myself coming into my own and I look forward to sharing my journey with you as a fellow adult in the years to come.