

For Our Lasting Good
Deuteronomy 6:20-25
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Despite having grown up in church, having completed a degree in Bible, and having been ordained just a few years before, by the turn of the millennium I was growing a little disenchanted and disengaged with church and was wondering whether ministry really was in my future. I was living in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Sadly, there is a Confederate flag rally being held in Shawnee this weekend, so you might see it on the national news.

Part of my disenchantment was a feeling that church was growing less relevant to my life and the issues that concerned me. I delighted in the beautiful worship and close relationships I had in the church I was attending and where I was an active layman—a deacon, college Sunday school teacher, and member of the missions committee. I was longing for something more, but wasn't quite sure what it was.

Then Tim Youmans arrived as our youth minister. Tim was just a few years older than I, and we quickly connected in our shared generational perspective on music, literature, film, television, and religion. We were both Southern Baptist

kids growing more progressive as a result of our education and life experiences.

Tim is now an Episcopal priest, and I'm a UCC pastor.

Those trajectories are pretty common among my group of clergy friends. You'll meet Dan Morrow next week, as he's here to preach for the twentieth anniversary of my ordination. Dan was an Oklahoma Baptist University student around this same time and now he's also an Episcopal priest. In fact he's the Canon for the Ordinary in Pennsylvania. Episcopalians have such fun titles. You can ask him next week exactly what a "Canon for the Ordinary" is.

Anyway, back to my story.

As the friendship between Tim and me was growing, and our conversations were wrestling with theological and spiritual issues, he invited me to be a sponsor for the youth retreat over the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend.

Now, I had never had any interest in youth ministry. What I said to people who asked was "I didn't understand teenagers when I was one, and I definitely don't understand them now."

But Tim persuaded me into grudgingly agreeing to go along.

On a cold Friday evening, I parked my car at the First Baptist Church and carried my luggage, sleeping bag, and pillow onto the church bus where I met a bunch of middle and high school kids who changed my life.

I'm standing here as your pastor today because of Will Sims and Matt Little and Adam Shepherd and Tyler Holland and a score of other Shawnee teenagers—well they were teenagers in 2000 but are now mostly thirtysomethings with their own kids. Because it was those kids who drew me back into the vitality of church and clarified my own vocation. It was because of them that I felt called into youth ministry for the first time. It was because of them that I chose to abandon the search for academic employment and life as a tenured professor and instead took a job as an associate pastor in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

How did those kids do it?

They pestered me with their questions.

They were unrelenting. Especially Will. I know what Jesus meant when he talked about fishing for men, because when I walked onto that bus, I was caught in a net I didn't know had been thrown to ensnare me.

Through the sheer force of their personalities, their curiosity about me and what I believed, and their insisting that I become their teacher and friend, the Holy Spirit worked to renew my sense of call.

We live in age of individualism, materialism, and consumerism which has ripped apart the social fabric and our sense of the common good. Our corrosive politics is merely a symptom of an underlying disease. I've been trying to grasp what that underlying issue is.

Earlier this year I was reading some essays by R. R. Reno who is the editor of the journal *First Things*. He is a former Creighton theology professor and a very conservative thinker, with whom I have much disagreement. But in his December 30 post he wrote that "what we need in 2017 is a renewal of covenant."

Back in 2009 my colleague and friend Robin Meyers, the pastor of Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City and a very outspoken liberal, published a book entitled *Saving Jesus from the Church* (which we studied once during Lent by the way) in which he argued that if our nation wanted to survive we needed "a renewed understanding of the meaning of covenant."

So, here's some common ground. And it is, in fact, *the* common ground. Covenant is the idea that we are bound together. Robin writes that covenant is "a collective expression of gratitude and mutuality."

When the staff got together months ago to plan Lent we decided to focus on this idea of covenant and chose as our theme “The Ties that Bind.” We will be focused on the ways that God saves us from our sins by bonding us together in mission for the world.

At our worship brainstorming party, it was suggested that we begin with the messiness of our lives in order to show how God takes the messiness and weaves it into something beautiful. So, on Ash Wednesday I asked you to consider what the mess is in your life right now. What do you need help with?

Sometime this season, today or another Sunday, I invite you to take one of the ribbons or strings or scraps of material which is in this basket here at the foot of the cross and tie it to the wire or weave it through. Let that scrap represent the thing in your life you need help with. And over the course of this season we’ll watch as the messes are woven into something new.

In our moments of uncertainty and distress, God is with us—working to deliver us, and bring us to safety and abundance.

Central to the biblical story is this idea that we are offered a choice. We can follow our own path and accept the consequences. Or we can choose to be part of the covenant community by doing what is right and good. And God promises that that path leads to new life and blessing.

That path is “for our lasting good.”

Those Shawnee kids drew me into relationship with them. And through their friendship I better understood myself and what God was calling me to do.

This Lent, let’s allow God to take the messiness of our lives and weave it into a beautiful pattern that binds us together.