

The morning that I left for college, Fr. Furlow, the chaplain from my older brother's high school, arrived at my house bright and early. It was odd, because he'd never come to our house – he was my brother's mentor and friend and while our family would exchange pleasantries with him when we saw him, my parents didn't interact with him with any regularity. What was even stranger was that he was there to see me. Confused, I met him in the living room where he was waiting. He stood up rather formally, reached out and held my hand. He had always been a bit of an eccentric guy, so I already knew I should just go with the flow on this one. "I've been told you're headed to college today. As you begin this new chapter of your life, as you learn about who you are, I'm going to give you a piece of advice." Fr. Furlow squeezed my hand rather firmly, and looked in my eyes with such an expression that I couldn't look away. "Live. Live your life – if you live it fully, you will live it well. Don't be so scared of failing that you don't try; don't be so scared of pushing boundaries that you don't explore; don't be hemmed in by anyone's expectations but your own. Experience all that life has to offer. **That** is what God desires for us. To live. Fully." With that, he placed his hands on my head, pronounced a blessing and left.

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We stood at the front of the church. He took my hand in his, looked me in the eye and made his vow ~ 'I will love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as we both shall live.' Hayne promised to be my greatest advocate, to support me when I am down, to celebrate with me when I soar. No doubt that it's not always been easy and it's probably not always been fun, but he has worked hard to keep his word. And for that, and so much more, I am deeply grateful.

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I pulled back the curtain and introduced myself. She slowly reached out while her eyes were still closed. She was hurt to the point that physical pain could not touch her. Her hand was flaming hot. And red. I was afraid to take the hand she reached out and offered. "I'm not afraid," she said. I let her hand

rest on mine, not daring to wrap my fingers around and touch her more than I needed to. Marjorie arrived mid-day at the hospital where I was the ER chaplain. She'd been burned. Badly. And she wouldn't survive. She knew that. But she was at peace. And she blessed me by holding out her hand and inviting me to enter her transition with her. "I've had a good life," she said. "I love my husband and my girls. I can say goodbye with no regrets. I am blessed." Her eyes were still closed. Mine were leaking. "Tell them I love them."

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These three interactions have been some of the most transformative moments of my life: my sending-off blessing by Fr Furlow; knowing my soon-to-be husband Hayne was committing to be by my side regardless of where life would lead us; and encounters like the one I had with Marjorie. In each instance, an invitation to be a companion on a sacred journey had been offered and accepted. They took their roles seriously, and so have I. Fr. Furlow, while not physically present with me at college, was present with me in a very real sense any time I faced a hard decision. My husband chose to face the unknown with me, even as we were both at a point in our lives when we didn't really know ourselves, much less each other. And Marjorie invited me to journey through her transition to death based on nothing more than my introduction as a chaplain and fellow Christian. Each has supported my life in Christ, and I have been blessed to be there to support their life (and in Marjorie's case) her death in Christ. My relationships with each of these individuals have been a few of the most sacred joys I've ever known.

All substantive relationships are special – both fragile and durable, with a constantly shifting balance between giving and receiving. But sacred relationships, those springing forth out of a love for God and God's creation, are so much more! They are rooted in the eternal. Holy inter-personal connections are committed to a divine dance of sacrifice, uncompromising fidelity, and spiritual nourishment. Sacred, covenantal relationships recognize God's image in the other, and nurture the other to live into their best self. Sacred relationships create freedom to be fully one's own authentic self while providing safe boundaries for spiritual intimacy and vulnerability.

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By the time I was baptized, I had been attending church for over a year, had asked lots of questions, had voiced a lot of doubts. I had taken a confirmation class to learn more about the Church, and I had read nearly all of the Bible straight through. At 16 years old, I figured was as prepared as I was ever going to be.

I knew that I would be making some important vows that morning. My priest and I had talked them through numerous times in the months and weeks prior. But I hadn't realized that there was a part in that service when the entire congregation would make a vow to me as well: Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in her life in Christ? Fr. Furlow was there – front and center – and I heard his voice, clear and strong, along with all the rest: **We will!** And he did. For years afterward, he popped in and out of my life, offering insight and encouragement, gentle nudges in one direction or away from another, and because of his commitment to pray for me regularly, he was always spiritually present with me. He took his role as my Christian brother very seriously, and was intentional in the way he fulfilled his vow to support my ongoing life in Christ.

Neither Hayne nor Marjorie were with me at my baptism. Not in any physical sense, anyway. A significant part of my relationship with my husband is our shared faith in Christ. We continue to seek and serve Christ in each other, and we challenge each other to be our best selves. Marjorie and I had not met before that afternoon. However, we were able to enter into an immediate relationship of trust and spiritual intimacy simply by virtue of recognizing the Christ in one another.

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When we choose to live as Christians, we choose to enter into a covenant with God and with all of God's children. How we live out our relationships with each other is a direct reflection of our love for God. It is rarely a perfect love, but it is something we covenant to working at each day, and something we commit to with all our heart. Choosing to follow where Jesus leads is not easy. It demands our best efforts, and it can expect more of us than we believe ourselves able to offer. Following Christ is not a choice that is made once for all – it is an active, ongoing, moment-by-moment choice.

In a few minutes, Anne will publicly declare her choice to walk this path, to join us on our journey with Christ, to allow us to hold her hand as she discovers who she is in the unfolding drama of God's story. She will state her determination – not just for herself, but for her three children as well – to follow where Jesus leads. She will enter into sacred relationship with us, asking us to help her discern God's voice in this noisy world, even as she promises to hold herself *and us* accountable to carrying out the hard work of being the Body of Christ. Her deliberate choice is our blessing.

Anne and her children are entering into covenant – with God and with us. She is declaring in word and deed that she, like Peter, believes that Jesus is the messiah. As we witness these vows, may we allow ourselves to be transformed anew with that same conviction; may we refresh the eyes of our faith to see the world as a place of promise and potential; may we recognize the hand of God in and around us at every moment.

You probably won't feel a zap or notice any sort of physical change. But you will be different, and so will we. We will be blessed to break bread with four more beautiful children of God; we will be blessed to nurture and be nurtured by the unique ways in which the four of you reflect the image of God in the world; we will be blessed that God's kingdom on earth will be that much closer to completion and perfection.

Thank you, Anne, for trusting us. Thank you for entering into sacred relationship with us, and for allowing us to intentionally journey with you and your kids this mysterious path along which Jesus has called us.