

## ***Family Ties***

From the Bible: Hebrews 12: 1-2, 12-13 and 28-19

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Bedford, NY  
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Four family photos to begin this morning's sermon...

### Snapshot #1

Setting: Sanctuary of the Buchanan First Presbyterian Church  
The last night of our summer work trip before we began heading home

Over the last couple of years the tradition has developed that on our last night in Buchanan County all of the high school students “sleep” in the sanctuary. Earlier in the evening we had agreed that everyone would have their teeth brushed, their sleeping bags moved and be “in place” at Midnight when we had agreed that the lights would be turned off. I had no illusions of them actually sleeping, but at least they would all be where they were supposed to be and I and the other adults could get 7 hours of sleep before getting up in the morning to begin our trip home. At 11:45 I walked into the sanctuary to give them the 15 minute warning knowing that if I walked in at Midnight it would take another 15 minutes, at least, for everyone to get settled, and that is when it started. An hour long conversation with a handful of the kids asking questions, challenging my responses and testing out their ideas about God and faith and values. Finally at 1:00 I had to call it quits. My mind could no longer keep up with their questions...and I was down to 6 hours sleep before I had to get up. But, I went to bed that night grateful for the questions and the conversation.

### Snapshot #2

Setting: Same trip  
In the van on the way home

His father is Muslim. His mom was raised Roman Catholic. He had never been involved in any type of organized religion until he was 14 and a freshman in high school when he went on his first work trip with me. Now he was in his late 20's, working with an organization that focuses on international economic development and microfinance. He had taken a week's vacation to be one of the adult leaders on work trip. Over the years we have stayed in touch. Once or twice a year finding a few minutes when he was “home” to catch up with each other. Inevitably some part of the conversation was about faith and values and how you put those values into practice in the complexity of the world as it is. This time the conversation centered around the relationship he was in with a young woman who he cared about very much. Unlike him, she grew up Southern Baptist and going to church each week. About as different an upbringing from his as they can imagine. In college, she began to question some of what she was taught as a child. In college, he began to think more seriously about what he really did believe. We talked about how he and his girlfriend, from such different backgrounds, might continue their conversation about faith and beliefs. Aiming not so much for “right answers” as finding common ground where they could and respecting their differences when there was still more learning and growing to do.

### Snapshot #3

Setting: A family's living room

After a year-long battle with cancer his wife was near the end of her life and he had asked me to come by to talk about planning a celebration of her life.

We have known each other for about 10 years now, but we had not seen each other for about five...since the day I married his daughter. Now, his wife was dying.

"I believe in God." He said.

I just don't go to church.

Some of that is just being lazy.

But some of it is that I can't stand all the rules and all the politics.

"I understand." I said.

With that we go on to talk about life and death and about what comes next.

### Snapshot #4

Magazine Article by Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Seminary in Austin, TX

I met Ted several years ago, and his brother, Don, was my preaching professor in seminary.

He writes about returning to his home town.

On the last night of my time there, an elder in that congregation – once one of my Sunday School teachers who told riveting Bible stories as if they had just happened the previous week – pulled me aside on the portico of the church as I was shaking hands after worship. "Teddy," he said as he looked intently at me, "your father and mother *are* so proud of you." The tense was intentional, even though he knew as well as I that my father has been gone for forty years, and my mother for eight. "Your father and mother *are* so proud of you." Not "would have been," or "must be," but "are." He spoke to me with the certainty of someone deeply acquainted with the faith, who perhaps has occasionally curled his toes over the edge of heaven and peered deeply into its infrastructure.

So, what do these four snapshots have in common?

This, I think...

The church, at its best...

Faith, at its very center...

Is more about relationships than about doctrine;

More about community and the *ties that bind* than it is about dogma.

It is about that *cloud of witnesses* that surround our lives.

- Those who faith and vision and insight and courage helped to shape who we are today.
- Those whose belief and belief in us linked us to an understanding of God that has sustained our life.
- Those who, even today, cheer us on from the heights of heaven.

It is about that *cloud of witnesses*...

- Those who built this church with "free pews" so that anyone could come, not just those who had enough money to pay for a seat;
- Those who, if the lore is correct, when they built the house that Shodie and I live in today, built it so it could serve as a stop on the Underground Railroad;
- Those who were among the first to elect woman to serve and Deacons and Elders;
- Those who opened our doors when the first AA group in Bedford was looking for a place to meet;

- Those who 40 years later opened our doors again when those who had no place to stay during the winter needed a safe, warm place to sleep.

It is about that *cloud of witnesses*...

- Those who gather here each Sunday...week in and week out;
- Those who hand out food at the Food Pantry;
- Those who do their best to ask the right questions and not just repeat the “right” answer.
- Those who walk into work not letting go of the values we lift up here.

That *cloud of witnesses* of which we are a part.

We are sustained by relationship;

Family ties.

That great *cloud of witnesses*.