

AColyte

Spring Break 2026
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



“COMMONS”

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Wynne Chapel

4400 miles from my favorite Bar

(Sandy Bell's in downtown Edinburgh,
around the corner from Greyfriars Kirk,
where J.K. Rowling got many of her character names
from tombstones in the graveyard)

March 2026

A person's a person, no matter how small.

Dr. Seuss,

Horton Hears a Who

Before we start, I want to acknowledge that what follows is pretty
Presbyterianish.

I know many of you reading this are not Presbyterianish at all.

No worries.

I think it will be worth the effort to tolerate the tartans because there's some stuff
in here that I'd like you to read.

Last Fall, I was invited to be the Guest Preacher for the Annual "Kirkin' of the
Tartans" services at First Presbyterian Church in Ft. Worth, TX.

According to Wikipedia,

*The [Kirkin' o' the Tartan](#) is a service of Scottish Christian heritage
where family tartans are brought to a church ("kirk") for a special blessing.
Originating as a 1941 American fundraiser by Rev. Peter Marshall for British war relief, it
commemorates a legend where Scots defied the 1746 ban on highland dress by secretly
wearing tartan to church*

I didn't bring a family tartan, although many families did that morning.

But the church gave me a really cool tartan stole that I wore during the service.



Former ACTivator and Majors Intern **Amy Parker** and several other friends at the church were instrumental in that very sweet gift.

So I felt properly decked out for the Kirkin' o' the Tartans as I ascended the pulpit on Sunday February 1.

Here's what I said:

I want to begin this morning by thanking you for your kind invitation to come and be part of your *Kirkin' of the Tartans* services.

Although I've lived in Sherman for 33 years, I was born and raised in Ft. Worth and I always feel like I'm home when I'm here. So thanks for having me.

I bring you greetings from Austin College.

We've enjoyed a strong and close relationship with First Ft. Worth for many years.

In fact, while I'm here with you this morning, [First Presbyterian, Ft. Worth Associate Pastor] Josh Stewart is preaching in Wynne Chapel on our campus as he finishes up serving as the Keynote speaker for the Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection this weekend.

And Austin College students—and First Church members—**Sarah Clingman** and **Lauren Stark** are leading Small Groups at that conference.

We love our many ties to this congregation.

I think one of the reasons Brian [FPC Pastor Brian Coulter] invited me to join y'all for the *Kirkin'* service today is because he knows that I have helped lead Austin College January Term courses in Scotland in the last few years.

In 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2024, I helped my colleague Wayne Crannell lead a course called "The History and Culture of Scotland."

And this morning I want to tell you about two places we go on those trips.

First, we always go to Arbroath Abbey.



In the year 1320, a group of Scottish nobles gathered at Arbroath Abbey in Eastern Scotland and wrote a letter to Pope John XXII urging him to declare that Robert the Bruce was the true and legitimate King of Scotland.

There were other claimants to the throne. And the nobles at Arbroath were seeking the Pope's help and blessing for their guy.

The authors of the letter—which came to be known as the Arbroath Declaration—told the Pope that the reasons Robert was the legitimate King of Scotland were

- “Divine Providence”
- “right of succession” and
- “the due consent and assent of us all”

Those first two reasons were pretty typical and unremarkable. For centuries, people had been arguing that their legitimacy as kings came from God's will and their bloodlines.

But the notion that Robert's legitimacy as king also came from “the due consent and assent of us all” was a new way of talking about the authority of monarchs.

The idea that the people in the kingdom should have some say in who their king should be was a new and significant idea in 1320. It was an expansion of the understanding of who gets to decide how the community functions.

The Arbroath Declaration marks a new understanding of who matters in the community.

The notion that the king's authority was tied to the consent of the people was an important expansion of their understanding of who matters in the nation.

And it was Scots who figured that out.

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About 300 years after the Arbroath Declaration, a different group of Scots gathered at Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh to sign what they called the National Covenant.

That Greyfriars Covenant was another in a long series of complaints by the Scots against the King of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Catholic Church.

The Covenant begins by announcing that

*Us noblemen,
barons,
gentlemen,
burgesses,
ministers,
and commons under subscribing...
do protest*

And then goes on with a bewilderingly long list of complaints and grievances about the King, the Anglican Church, and Roman Catholicism.

I don't think the point of Kirkin' of the Tartans services like this one today is to celebrate the Scots' impressive history of bitter and elaborate complaining (particularly about the English). But I do think it's important for us to pay attention to *who* was complaining in the Greyfriars Covenant.

The notion—inherent in this covenant—that the list of people who have a right to share opinions and advocate positions about the way their civil and religious lives should be organized includes not only

Noblemen, barons, gentlemen, burgesses, and ministers

but also “commons” was a new thing.

“Commons” refers to people who were not *noblemen, barons, gentlemen, burgesses, or ministers*.

That’s a bigger and more inclusive understanding of who has the right to share opinions and criticize the government than had been present in most of Europe before 1638.

With all its weird language, tacky and uncharitable statements about Roman Catholics, and naïve and questionable claims about “the true religion,” the Scottish National Covenant of 1638 is worth remembering for its (relatively) expansive understanding of who makes up the community.

Of who matters.

So when we’re in Scotland, I always talk to students about “the consent of the governed” when we’re at Arbroath Abbey.

And about the “commons” when we’re at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh.

In their own way, both of those lessons are evidence that, through the years, the Scots have thought about ways that our common story involves more characters and participants than we used to think. Not just God, kings, and nobles. But “commons”—characters that have been overlooked in the past.

Over the years, the Scots expanded their idea of who matters.

With that Scottish insight in mind, let’s turn our attention now to Luke’s familiar story of the Prodigal Son that we’ve heard this morning.

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.

¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them.

¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living.

¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need.

¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate,

²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹ Then the father¹ said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

In nearly 38 years of ministry, I have preached and taught about this famous parable many times.

Lots of us are very familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

It's great literature with good dramatic tension between the impatient younger son, the compassionate father, and the jealous older son.

I usually talk about how the point of this story is that we're all each other's siblings no matter what mistakes we make or how jealous we get of the fortune of others.

But thinking about Arbroath and Greyfriars this week has reminded me that the father and two sons aren't the *only* characters in this story.

There's also the "citizen" in verse 15 who has pigs to feed.

There are references to "hired hands" in verse 17 and 19 and "slaves" figure heavily in verses 22, 23, and 26.

In all my years studying, teaching, and preaching about this story, I've never thought much about them.

But there they are.

After thinking about the Arbroath insight that political authority depends on the consent and assent of the governed;

And remembering the inclusion of "commons" as signatories of the Greyfriars Covenant;

I don't think I can ignore those other characters in this parable any more.

I know it's Jesus talking and all that, but I've come to realize that, at its surface, this old, familiar parable as traditionally understood is essentially a story about rich people.

It's about inheritance.

And generational wealth.

And privilege.

To use language from the Greyfriars Covenant, the father and sons in this story are like

Noblemen, barons, gentlemen, and burgesses.

Think about it.

Not everybody who “finds themselves in need” has the option of just packing up and going back home to their rich Dad.

But that’s what the younger son does in this story.

There’s some privilege here.

I had never really thought about that before.

But now I think those of us who are able to be in this beautiful place—on this beautiful day [or at Austin College—ED.]—might need to think about it a little.

Don’t get me wrong: I still think my original punch line from my other sermons about the Prodigal Son is valid.

This really is a story about remembering that God’s children are our siblings—no matter what they do or what mistakes they make.

But our conversation about Arbroath and Greyfriars this morning should remind us that we need to recognize and remember that the great list of God’s children who are our siblings also includes folks who we tend to overlook, ignore, or take for granted.

In addition to a sweet old father and two sons who are each selfish in their own way, the Parable of the Prodigal Son includes several other characters as well.

There's the "citizen" who has pigs to feed and who hires the younger son to feed his pigs. Even though verse 16 says "No one gave [the younger son] anything," there's nothing to indicate that the guy who hired him didn't pay him.

There are slaves in verse 22 who bring the robe, ring, and sandals for the father to give to his returning son.

There are others in verse 23 who kill, cook, and serve the fattened calf.

In verses 26-27, when the older brother sees the celebration and asks what's going on, it's another slave who tells him.

All of those characters play an important role in the story.

This morning is a particularly good time for us to recognize and remember that they matter as well.

Friends, as we celebrate the *Kirkin' of the Tartans* today, I invite you all to remember the insights of our forbears at Arbroath and Greyfriars that

- Everybody matters,
- Including the ones who might have been dismissed or overlooked in the past.

Their consent matters.

Their voices matter.

By the way, that's also the lesson of the Deuteronomy passage we heard earlier:

[It's Deuteronomy 10:17-19:

¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods
and Lord of lords,

the great God, mighty and awesome,
who is not partial and takes no bribe,

¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow,
and who loves the strangers,
providing them food and clothing.

¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.]

Remember that everybody matters,

Including widows, orphans, and strangers.

So as we “Kirk the Tartans” today, let us remember and take seriously the Scottish insight and biblical truth that everybody matters:

- no matter what they have;
- where they’re from;
- how they look;
- what they believe;
- who they love; or
- how they vote.

Our Presbyterian tradition and these biblical passages call us all to remember and embody with our actions the truth that what we have in common with each other—with everyone—matters more than the things that separate us.

That feels like an urgent and relevant truth in the world where we woke up this morning.

Let’s stay prepared to expand our understanding of who matters.

And show our neighbors how to do that as well.

It’s the most authentically Scottish thing we could do.

Amen.

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I had fun writing and preaching that sermon.

I ended the service with a prayer from the Scots Confession of 1560:

*Arise, O Lord,
And let thine enemies be confounded;
Let them flee from thy presence
That hate thy godly Name.
Give thy servants strength
to speak thy Word with boldness.*

That prayer makes me think of those who deny or have forgotten that everybody matters.

I hope they are (lovingly) confounded.

The Church even turned me into a reel:

<https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1DodVKL8UA/>

I stand by those words.

Of course not everybody at Austin College is Scottish or Presbyterian.

But we all stand in that stream.

Around here we do a pretty good job of remembering and embodying the truth that everybody matters:

- no matter what they have;
- where they're from;
- how they look;
- what they believe;
- who they love; or
- how they vote.

There are people who don't believe people can live together that way in the real world.

But I know better.

Because I know y'all.

Until After the Break, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Sinfully Proud to Wear a Tartan Stole with a Kangaroo on It,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain