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Arlington Street Church  
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### **Covenant Renewal: Whose Are You?**

Visiting from her home in Florida this past week, Kem's mother was in the great misery of aging, indignity following upon indignity. Last Saturday, hoping to cheer her up by getting her out of the house, we took her for a drive – which she hated. The litany of her miseries was seemingly without end. And then, when she got out of the car, her legs just wouldn't hold her up. Down onto the sidewalk she went – not a fall, exactly, but a slow slide to sprawl.

Of the many thoughts that went through my mind as I jumped out and raced around the car to her, one of the more interesting was, "I'm a terrible daughter in law." And not just that; I thought, "Everyone watching right now must be thinking, 'What a terrible daughter in law'" – as if they'd even know who I was.

But here's what's amazing to me. Two things: first, *everyone* nearby stepped in to help. As it turned out, she didn't need help; almost immediately, she was back on her feet, under her own steam. But the point is that, rather than stepping back, people stepped in. And second, not one person so much as gave me the evil eye. All I saw, surrounding us, were faces lined with concern and kindness – not just for my mother in law, but for Kem and me, and for the whole human condition of an aging parent and the next generation swapping-out roles to care for the person who once cared for them.

Even though I was a little shaken by how quickly this all transpired, the feeling with which I was left was of connection and gratitude – this sense of kinship, of deeply belonging to the human race – and of living this chapter in the human condition not alone, but surrounded by care and hands extended to uplift.

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I'm positive that each of us wants to feel that way: not alone, not isolated, but connected and cared for. American poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote

We are each other's business  
 We are each other's harvest  
 We are each other's magnitude and bond.<sup>1</sup>

Quaker Douglas Steere teaches that the ancient question, *Who am I?* inevitably leads to the equally important question, *Whose am I?* Whose am I? I'm going to put a stake in the ground and set up my tent right here, with this question: not *Who am I?* but *Whose am I?*

First thought, best thought: This isn't about your professional identity, your job, your portfolio, your money ... or the lack of any of those things.

*Whose are you?* is about who and what you love and who loves you;  
 with whom, with what you share  
 a sense of connection and engagement and reciprocity.  
*Whose are you?* is about who and what brings you joy,  
 who and what makes you laugh,  
 the people with whom and the places where you can cry.  
*Whose are you?* is about where you feel safe and sound,  
 helped and healed and held.

My colleague, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, goes one step further. She writes, "Whose are we? We belong to G\*d. We belong to one another.... We belong to the land. If a practice is good for [us], it needs ... to be good for our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? Our neighbor is everyone who isn't already ... kin, every stranger, ... every one."<sup>2</sup>

We are each other's business  
 We are each other's harvest  
 We are each other's magnitude and bond.

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<sup>1</sup> ... except Gwendolyn Brooks flipped the first two lines (harvest, then business)

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community" (2011). For more information, please see [c.yomcdn.com/sites/www.uuma.org/resource/collection/432F3601-4A77-42EF-BF2EA72D048D/StangersHolyGndOct23.pdf](http://c.yomcdn.com/sites/www.uuma.org/resource/collection/432F3601-4A77-42EF-BF2EA72D048D/StangersHolyGndOct23.pdf)

One day in the fall of 2002, my colleague and friend Patrick O’Neill got a call from a member of his congregation in Wilmington, Delaware, asking him to please come. It felt urgent. He arrived at her modest house and sat down to coffee. It turned out that his parishioner had just inherited a fortune. Her financial needs were already met; her grown children were providing for themselves; and she wanted, she said, to give the church a gift.

“I suppose I could wait ’til I die to do this, but I’d rather see it do some good,” she told him. And with that, she handed Patrick a check for a million dollars.

Patrick began to cry, and she began to cry, and when Patrick said, “Why are you crying?” – here comes my favorite part! – she said, “Because this feels even better than I thought it would.”<sup>3</sup>

That great gift afforded the purchase of land adjacent to the church and the construction of a new sanctuary. One woman’s generosity begat so much more generosity, as the congregation went about the good work of expressing its gratitude for the opportunity to walk together, and to serve the greater good.

This feels even better than I thought it would:  
 We are each other’s business  
 We are each other’s harvest  
 We are each other’s magnitude and bond.

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Do you know for whom LaGuardia Airport is named? This is a really great story.

Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during the worst of the Great Depression and through all of World War II. He was five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. New Yorkers called him “the Little Flower.” They loved him.

He was colorful. He used to ride on the fire trucks; raided speakeasies with the police; and was known for taking entire orphanages to baseball games. When the newspapers went on strike, he went on the radio and read the Sunday comics to the kids.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Patrick O’Neill, *The Shoemakers’ Window*, 2/19/03.

On a bitterly cold night in January of 1935, Mayor LaGuardia showed up at a night court that served one of the poorest areas of the city. He dismissed the judge and took over the bench for the evening. A beaten-down, elderly woman was brought before him; she was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told him that her daughter's husband had abandoned the family, her daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving.

The plaintiff, a shopkeeper, was not unsympathetic; but "Your Honor," he said, "it's a really bad neighborhood, and she has to be punished to keep everyone else from robbing me blind."

The Little Flower sighed and thought for a moment. Turning to the woman, he said, "I have to punish you. The law makes no exceptions: ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he was pronouncing the sentence, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Here is the ten dollar fine, which I now remit," he intoned, "and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The next day, the newspapers reported that forty seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to the bewildered old lady, fifty cents of which had been contributed by the grocery store owner, and that some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid for the privilege of doing so, rose to give the mayor a standing ovation.<sup>4</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

*Who are you? Who are we?*

We are the one who falls, and the ones who reach out to catch.

We are the giver and the receiver, both in tears.

We are the desperate grandmother, the irate shopkeeper,  
the judge with our hand in our pocket,  
and the crowd, applauding mercy and generosity  
and the triumph of kindness.

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<sup>4</sup> as told by Brennan Manning in *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat Up, and Burnt Out*

*Whose are you? Whose are we?*

Here, in this beloved spiritual community of memory and hope,  
may we feel a sense of kinship and care and deep belonging,

Helped and healed and held,  
may we help and heal and hold.

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We are each other's business

We are each other's harvest

We are each other's magnitude and bond.

“Why are you crying?”

“Because this feels even better than I thought it would.”

*Amen*