

“When Your Children Ask You”
Deuteronomy 6:1-13, 20-25
Commitment Sunday

November 9, 2025
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Have you ever had the experience of signing up for something, or making a commitment to do something...and it was only after you got into it, that you came to realize you didn't know what it was that you were committing to do...when you signed up to do it?

Once upon a time, there was a young man who wanted to be a Buddhist monk.

He went from America to Tibet, went to see the Abbot.

“I want to become a monk.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” said the Abbot, “it means seven years of silence, after which you get two words.”

So, the young man spent seven years in total silence.

After those seven years, the Abbot called him in and said, “You now can say two words.”

He said, “Cold breakfast.”

“Are you going to stay?” asked the Abbot.

“Yes.”

“Well, it means seven more years of silence, and then you get two more words.”

So another seven years of silence pass.

After which, the Abbot calls him in.

“You can now say two words.”

“Hard bed.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it means seven more years...”

And after seven more years, total silence, the Abbot calls him in.

“You now have two words.”

And the young man, who was now not so young anymore...he said, “I quit.”

And the Abbot said, “It’s just as well...you’ve done nothing but complain ever since you got here.”¹

Do you know what it’s like to sign up for something, to make a commitment, and only learn afterwards the true nature, the true character of that commitment?

I ask the question because today is Commitment Sunday.

The day when we make our financial pledge to Westminster for the coming year.

Now on the one hand, when you bring your card forward, you know what you’re committing to do.

Promising to be generous with gifts that God has given you.

Making a commitment that will help us love our neighbors, that will help Westminster hire new staff, a pledge that will help our ministries to thrive, and by God’s grace, it will help our church to continue to grow.

¹ As told in a sermon by Fred Craddock, “But If the Answer Is No,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

So, on the one hand, the answer is yes.
On this day of all days, we know what it is we're committing to do.

And yet...another part of me wonders if that's true.

You see, I raise the question today because of our text.

On the brink of the Promised Land, Moses says to the Israelites:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Moses is asking the Israelites for a commitment.
And you recognize those words, right?

When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, this is the passage that he quoted. It's the Shema, one of the most important prayers in the Jewish faith.

And in our own faith, I would submit that these are the words that lie behind your pledge.

Why do we ask our members to make a financial commitment?

Not just because the church needs it.
But because our souls need it.
Because it's one of the ways we express our love for God.

Pledging is spiritual discipline, borne out of a larger faith commitment: to love God with all that we are, with nothing left behind. Pledging is a way of trusting in God's love, wherever that love leads you.

So...when God is doing the leading, and we're doing the following, do we ever really know ahead of time what it is that we've signed up for, what it is that God is going to ask us to do?

Let me give you an example.

Shirley Chisholm—do you remember this name?
There's a movie that came out on Netflix last year about her.

Back in 1972, Shirley Chisholm was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. A few years earlier, she had become the first Black woman to be elected to Congress in this country. And one of the politicians running against her for the nomination was George Wallace.

You remember Governor Wallace, right?

Wallace was infamous for his opposition to integration in the 1960s. Someone whom Martin Luther King, Jr. once called "The most dangerous racist in America."

During the campaign, Wallace was shot in a terrible act of political violence, leaving him partially paralyzed.

So what did Shirley Chisolm do?
She decided to visit George Wallace in the hospital.

Her advisors were astonished.
They thought it was a politically risky thing to do.
Shirley Chisolm did not care about all that.
She just said it was the right thing to do.

And she walked into that hospital room.
And she sat with George Wallace.

And she talked with George Wallace.

And years later, it was George Wallace's daughter who said that it was this visit by Chisholm that started the change of heart that occurred in her father when, in his later years, he said "I was wrong" about segregation.²

Do you think Shirley Chisholm ever imagined that she would be seated in a room with Governor Wallace, not to argue with him, nor because she LIKED him, but because her commitment to love God with all her heart and might and soul...well, this is what that commitment required her to do?

Do you see what I'm getting at?

When it comes to how God is going to use us,
when it comes to what our commitments might ask of us...
most times, you and I don't have clue.

Do you recall our baptism from earlier this morning?
How many commitments were a part of that baptism?

The one that the parents made.
The one that all of you as God's church made.
And the one that was already made...the one that came from God.

Now, I don't recall where it was exactly, but years ago, there was a Presbyterian minister who, early on in her ministry, was getting ready for a dual baptism.

² The story of Chisolm meeting with George Wallace can be found in many places on the Internet. One source for this story is [When Shirley Chisholm Paid a Visit to George Wallace](#).

It was going to be a special day.
It was a mother and her infant daughter.
Both were being baptized at the same time.

So, the pastor met with the mother, talked about the meaning of baptism. And the pastor met with the Session, and the Session approved the baptism.

You know the process, right?

In our denomination, there are all these steps that we take BEFORE baptism happens, because we want to make sure that there's MEANING with baptism, that parents understand what's going on.

Well, the scheduled day arrived.

And in this particular Presbyterian church, the baptismal liturgy called for the pastor to say the following:

“Would those who are presenting themselves for baptism please come forward?”

And the mother rose from her pew, carrying her infant daughter.
And then, something unexpected took place.
Just behind them, a few rows back—two other people rose from their pew.

It was another mother.
And her teenage daughter.
They were visitors in church that day.

They were not Presbyterian—at least, not yet—but they heard the pastor's invitation.

It sounded open-ended.

And they wanted to be baptized.
 So there they were, standing in front of the sanctuary:
 Two people the pastor was planning on baptizing.
 And two people the pastor had never met before in her life.

If something like that had happened here, earlier today, what should I have done?

I know what I would've done.
 I would have baptized all of them.

And then, I would have arranged for a meeting with the two UNEXPECTED baptismal candidates...so that we could talk about what it means to follow Christ and to be baptized into Christ's Church.

That's important, right?
 Understanding what it is you've signed up for?
 Of course it's important.

But it's not what's most important.

Do you recall what Moses said to the Israelites after giving them the great commandment?

"When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders...'"

I hope you didn't miss that part.

The meaning behind the greatest commandment, the reason we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and being...is not our understanding of God.

It's wonder.
Our wonder in the presence of God.

We like to think that ethics, spiritual disciplines, like making a pledge—that those come first, and then if we've tried to love God with all our heart and soul and strength, God will give us whatever grace we need to make up the difference.

But we've got it backwards.

Before the Shema, before the Ten Commandments, there was the burning bush and the parting of the Red Sea. The wonder and mystery of God...

Before the Apostle Paul wrote, "Love is patient. Love is kind," he was struck blind by Jesus and heard the voice of Jesus. It was the wonder and mystery of God...

Before Jesus preached about loving one's enemies, there was the revelation at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The wonder and mystery of God...

It was the late rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who wrote, "I prayed for wonders instead of happiness, Lord, and you gave them to me."³

³ David Brooks, "The Shock of Faith," found at [Opinion | The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be - The New York Times](#).

Whenever I'm asked why I became a minister, the story I tell—and you've heard some of this before—is that I was serving with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps as a paralegal for a poverty law agency, trying to decide whether I wanted to go to law school. At that time, I was 22 years old, and becoming a pastor was NOT on my radar screen.

Over the Christmas break that year, I went back home to Michigan and had lunch with the pastor of my home church.

“How do you like what you're doing?” he asked.

“It's ok,” I said. “I like this, I don't like that.”

“You don't sound terribly excited,” he said.

“Well...I just don't know what I want to do next year. Do I go to law school, spend thousands of dollars? I don't know if I want to practice law, or what kind of law I would find satisfying.”

Now at this point in the conversation, most pastors take the approach of being very pastoral. What do you like about law? What reservations would you have? What gifts do you think God has given you?

My pastor took a very different approach.

He said to me: “You need to go to seminary.”

“I need to do WHAT?” I said.

“You're called to be a pastor, I can see it, I've seen it for years.”

“There's no way in heck I'm going to be a pastor,” I said.

“I'll send you an application form,” he said.

And before I knew it, I had filled out the form, the decision was made, and I was on my way to seminary the following fall.

In other words, it was the encouragement of others, what someone close to me saw that I couldn't see...that's why I went into the ministry.

That's the story I always tell.

What I rarely share is that there was something else. A memory of being 12 or 13 years old, and I was delivering papers in my neighborhood, I was a paper boy for a few years...and out of the blue, I said to myself, "Do I really have to be a pastor?"

That was 10 years before that conversation with my pastor.
Why did I say that to myself?
I've tried to explain it.

Maybe someone else suggested it to me, and I don't remember that.

Maybe it was career day at school, and someone listed the ministry as a potential career path, and I don't remember that.

I don't know.
I do know that I remember barely anything of what my life was like at 12 years old...but I remember that day.

And I can't rule out (even though I want to rule it out) that it was the wonder and mystery of God that came to me that day.

Which is why this day, Commitment Sunday, is one of my favorite days of the church year. Because when I look out at each of you bringing your pledge cards forward, I don't just see you. I see the wonder and mystery and grace of God, at work in you.

Before you turn in your pledge today, let me invite you to do something.

Ask yourself, how did you get here?
Was it your own doing, or was it God's?

What wonders has God given you?

Amen.