I would like to tell you the story of Jock Tamson. It’s a lovely story of a person who was so warm and open to others, that everyone who knew him loved him, and he knew everyone and loved them too. Indeed, he treated everyone with such warmth and affection that he couldn’t have been kinder to people if he’d been their father.

Across the years, people would go to him with their joys and their sorrows, their hopes and their fears, and he would smile or soothe, encourage or help. His treatment of people became proverbial - he was like a father to all - and it gave rise to the expression "We're all Jock Tamson's bairns" - we're all his children.

I’d love to tell you that story, but I can’t. There is no story. Jock Tamson didn’t exist. He is a mythical character. His name John Thomson is a nice generic name, like John Doe, chosen to be non-specific. And the expression, "we’re all Jock Tamson’s bairns" evokes the idea that we are all children of some human parent, all sharers together in a joint humanity.

It’s a protest against the divisiveness which keeps people apart and creates barriers.

Exactly the spirit of one of Robert Burns’ best known songs: *Is there for honest poverty?* He reflects on different stations in life that people occupy, from pauper to king, and then ends,

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Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a’ that
That sense and worth o’er all the earth
May bear the gree and a’ that;
For a’ that and a’ that,
It’s comin’ yet for a’ that,
That man to man the world o’er
Shall brithers be for a’ that.
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Even if you need an English translation (!), I’m sure you caught Burns’ drift: the time is coming when sense and substance will define a person’s worth, and divisiveness will end.

This Kirkin’ of the Tartans service also protests against divisiveness. It recalls a time when the British parliament made wearing tartan illegal in an attempt to suppress the clans and the loyalty they fostered. But with that stubborn independent streak the Scots are famous for, people resisted and refused to comply. They wore their loyalty with pride, and their tartans with commitment.

But the closest background parallel to what we do parading clan banners into church would be the gathering of the clans, usually to fight some battle. Now, the clans could be pretty clannish at times, seething with suspicion, jealousy or even hostility towards rivals, but all that would be forgotten in a crisis, and the gathering of the clans would thus be a great expression of unity and common purpose.

A protest against divisiveness and reminder of our unity and an expression of our common purpose. It’s a reminder we constantly need; don’t you think?
Look around the world. Our world is horribly and dangerously divided, and the love of God for all the world is not only denied, it is mocked by this sad reality.

Divisiveness was in the air in our reading from Luke’s gospel today: the divisiveness that categorizes some people as ‘them’ as distinct from ‘us.’ There had been a tragedy; the wisdom of the day assumed that the tragedy was proof that the victims were sinners, and that therefore those who avoided tragedy were not sinners. A classic religious ploy of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ When this issue was presented to Jesus he rejected it—twice; once in the example the questioners cited and then again in another example that Jesus added for emphasis.

There is no “us versus them” Jesus declared, indeed, everyone stands in need of God’s mercy and grace: you’d better all repent. And if that sounds forbidding, notice that Jesus immediately went on to teach about the grace and patience of God—inventing a response, and longing for it.

Paul made the same underlying point in appealing to the church in Philippi to strive for unity and put an end to divisiveness, by contrasting the elf-centeredness which promotes divisiveness with the self-giving, sacrificial love that brought Jesus to the cross. The seeming weakness of the cross, however, leads to an assured result: the day when “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

And Jesus is the embodiment of God’s gracious, seeking love, reaching out to all the world, breaking down the barriers people erect, making all of us equal before God. Jesus wanted us to know that we are not just Jock Tamson’s bairns, we are children of our loving heavenly Father and each of us is precious and important in God’s sight.

This insight was a gift that inspired the Reformation principle of ‘the priesthood of all believers.’ Rejecting the impenetrable division the church had created between clergy and lay, Reformers affirmed the truth they had discerned in Jesus and in Paul that all of us, precisely as children of our heavenly Father, could receive his full and free forgiveness and, equally, could respond to God in worship and in service as we believe God called.

The journey to where we are today, with the Presbyterian Church’s Book of Order powerfully proclaiming “God alone is Lord of the conscience” involves a story fought out in Scottish history.

378 years ago today, on Wednesday February 28, 1638, The National Covenant was signed in Greyfriars’s Church in Edinburgh, rejecting the king’s attempts to control the church and affirming what they called the Crown Rights of the Redeemer—and the spiritual independence of the church, governed by Christ’s word in scripture and free of state control.

In was heady, dangerous stuff, and many ordinary people just like us paid for their loyalty to Christ with imprisonment and death; but the struggle secured the religious freedoms we enjoy today and made contributions to many facets of society, from democracy, to education, to social science.

The meaning of this heritage is still being worked out today—in the ministry of Christ’s church as often ordinary people are used by Christ to carry on his work of breaking down barriers and bringing people home to God.
For a number of years, William Willimon served as Bishop of the North Alabama Methodist conference. It was often grueling and discouraging work. One day he had an appointment with two elderly ladies.

One of them wanted to tell him how her grandson had got busted, DUI, and that led to remarkable opportunities. She visited him in his youth prison camp. Then, appalled by the conditions, she started reading classes, since 90% of the inmates couldn’t read. Then she began bible study groups, three to date, and two nursing friends also visited, giving advice on sexual health. Then and two ladies who can’t get out baked cookies for the boys: “Some of them said it was the first gift they’d ever received,” she continued enthusiastically. Willimon relates how the conversation continued:

“And you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?” I asked with bureaucratic indifference.
“No, we don’t want to mess it up,” she responded.
“You need me to come up with some money for you?”
“Don’t need any money. If we need something we get it from our little church,” she said.
“Then why have you come down here to tell me about this?” I asked.

“Well, we know that being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church—too many things that we are not doing that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys and I thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something’s going right, that is, up in Cullman.”

In the late afternoon light, Birmingham glowed like the Holy City...¹

A ministry, not only of healing and redemption, but also of encouragement; Christ at work through ordinary people!

Such is the grace of God that human experiences, even difficult ones may be used in his service to contribute to his mission of healing the world and reaching out for more of God’s precious children.

One of the great modern Scotsmen was Lord Reith, who served for many years as Director-General of the BBC. At his funeral, Andrew Herron commented that there was something essentially Scottish about him. He explained,

Scotland is a land where to have climbed one mountain is merely to have gained a clearer view of the loftier peak ahead still unscaled, where to have gained a lovely vista is but to have espied a better vantage point still further [ahead]. Does this go someway to explain that inability of [his] ever to be satisfied with what he had achieved, that stretching and straining and striving for the bigger and the grander and the more worthwhile thing that was still [ahead] ...²

Isn’t that how it should be in our Christian life: striving for the bigger, grander and more worthwhile thing still ahead ...

¹ William Willimon, “First-year Bishops” in the Christian Century, September 20, 2005, 28ff
² Andrew Herron, Record Apart Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974