

Fighting for the world

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

May 24, 2012

I once went on a blind date. He was a law student, a friend of a friend, and I was a seminarian. We met for drinks.

He was nice, funny. He was a self-identifying Christian--the first one, actually, I had ever gone out with. We were talking about our chosen professions; he was, as many are, fascinated by the idea of a call to ministry. My call story is not exactly dramatic, but it has a social justice edge, forged on youth group mission trips and in researching poverty. "I want to make the world a better place," I told the date.

The future lawyer looked at me and asked, "But isn't the world a fallen place?"

The question seemed awfully fatalistic. It is what it is, so let it lie. There's certainly a tradition of that in Christianity, but it's not the branch that calls me to a life of discipleship, a life of ministry. I follow what I have come to call [a High School Musical theology](#): "We're all in this together."

The world may well be broken, even fallen. But it's also been redeemed, and the sign of that unfolding redemption lies in our ability in love God and neighbor, to be the body of Christ. That redemption becomes real in living as though we actually believe that all people are critical parts of that body. It's in living as though we're all in this together, and that the world of ours is worth fighting for, fallen or not.

The blind date was a little older than I, enough that he thought my hopefulness was naive, if (surely) charmingly so. But [this interview with actor Ed Norton and his college friend Abby Sigal](#) reminds me that hope, born of and fed by a deep engagement with the world, is not just a facet of rosy-eyed youth. It's a life's work.

Norton's grandfather, James Rouse, was a child during the Great Depression; he was orphaned and he struggled. He was in later years deeply committed to affordable housing. A real estate developer, Rouse founded [Enterprise Community Partners](#). Sigal now heads the organization, which has built thousands of units of affordable housing over the years.

Rouse, as Sigal and Norton recall, believed in the possibility of strong communities, of people achieving their dreams, and of giving back in creative and sustained ways. My own grandfather grew up during the Depression, knew the loss of house and home, knew struggle. He grew up determined to provide for his family, so that we could pursue our callings. He served his church and community. He wasn't the charismatic guy Rouse was, but that engagement with the world and that sense of duty or vocation to enable and empower others to serve was present for both of them--and for a host of others.

In the interview, Norton quotes Hemingway: people who "think. . . 'the world is worth fighting for' are appealing."

I agree; that's why I can no longer even remember the blind date's name. There's so much doom and gloom about the mainline church these days (some of it in my own heart, after [the spectacle of the United Methodist gathering earlier this month](#)). Anne Russ's list of the "[Ten Reasons Why You Should Be Going to Church](#)" has been circulating among my clergy colleagues, as we attempt to give voice to why we think this work we do is worthwhile--even when Russ's common-sense wisdom gets far less publicity than a hate-mongering [pastor talking about fencing off gay people](#).

But just as there was a wonderful mystery and synchronicity that brought together a group of funny and engaged college kids in the late 80s--kids who now make movies and affordable housing--there is a wonderful mystery and synchronicity to the workings of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost we celebrate the birth of a group of people who believe the world and its people are worth fighting for--fighting with words, faith, action, money and hope.

That spirit reminds us that there are at least ten reasons why we should be going to church, and that the gospel will continue to speak those reasons into the hearts of young and old, despite our seemingly endless capacity to stutter and stumble.