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SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: TOM KOHLER
DIRECTOR/CAMERA: ERIC DARLING
PRODUCER: MICKEY YOUMANS

SUBJECT: REV. MICHAEL CHANEY



Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:38:09 [Eric Darling]: Go ahead and hit it. Thank you.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:42:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Okay. Mickey. Soft sticks.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:44:23 [Eric Darling]: He doesn't even say it, he just smacks the sticks. I think we're good whenever You good. Whenever you set that down, we're good? Yeah. Alright. Ready when you are. Tom

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:55:00 [Tom Kohler]: Michael, thanks for being with us this afternoon. We appreciate it.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:57:19 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: My pleasure.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:53:58:13 [Tom Kohler]: First question I need to ask you if you don't mind if you'll say your name and spell your name, please.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:03:21 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I'm the Reverend Michael Cheney.
M-I-C-H-A-E-L-C-H-A-N-E-Y.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:10:05 [Tom Kohler]: And do you have pronouns that you prefer?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:12:07 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I like he, him, I guess.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:14:11 [Tom Kohler]: Great. Well, thank you.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:15:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I guess, yeah,

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:17:04 [Tom Kohler]: I'm just gonna start off and ask you about you, if you don't mind. Sure. I'd like to find out where you were born and if you were not born here, how you got here, and if there are things that happened on the journey between when you were born and when you got here that you think are important for us to know. Don't be afraid to tell us those stories as well. Okay.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:38:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Alright. I can, I can talk Tom, I can tell you some stories.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:43:03 [Tom Kohler]: I'm watching the clock.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:54:43:23 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: All right. Fair enough. I was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, and the day after I was born, my dad was shipped off to Vietnam. I spent my entire life in Mississippi until I was about 20, and Mississippi was a good place to grow up, I suppose. That's what I knew. I was fortunate that I had parents who were good people. They had kind hearts, and their faith was very much a part of their identities and what

16:55:16:20 informed them to be kind and generous people with open and justice-thriving hearts. When I was 20, gimme... Spend any more time on my childhood?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:55:32:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I, I grew up in the Episcopal church and I suppose it was all right. I, I, I really honestly liked the church because when I was a teenager, I got to go to church camp on the weekends and there were girls there, and that was pretty, pretty awesome. So I had this kind of wonderful relationship with the church. I didn't mind being an Episcopalian at all. When my friends who were in the kind of conservative Baptist or evangelical wing of Christianity, their parents were sitting around at bars, taking down license plates and trying to figure out who was smoking and drinking. You know, my parents were, and my community was more

16:56:06:04 interested in working with other faith communities and making the world a better place. And I like that. My dad did something really interesting when I was a kid, which is he took me to a lot of different churches. He wanted me to see how other people worshiped and how faith was a part of their lives. So when I was about 13, he took us to our local synagogue, which was interesting. In my little town in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The biggest Christmas party of the year was held by the Jewish Merchants

Michael Chaney

16:56:32:14 Association. I just thought that all around the world, Jews threw Christmas parties. I didn't know any different. We had a really interesting town in Mississippi. It was very diverse. We had a big Lebanese community, which meant we had a big Greek Orthodox or, or orthodox Eastern Orthodox community.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:56:52:15 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I thought, seriously, growing up southern food was fried chicken, collard greens, kibbeh and tabbouleh. That was what I thought southern food was about. We had a big Chinese population. And you know, I guess when you're in a smallish town and you're isolated, you don't have the internet. You think that's the world. And it wasn't until I was 20, then I moved away from Mississippi and I discovered something different when I was 20. I had gone to college at, I went to Mississippi State University for a couple of years, and one of my teachers had suggested that I had to really explore my artistic talent at a art school. So I applied to

16:57:28:12 an art school in Pasadena, California, and off if I was gonna go. And my mother was very scared, knowing the little lotus eater that I was, she feared for my life in the land of milk and honey. And she was right to do so. She had made me promise her that I would go to church at least once when I got out to Southern California. And I said, sure. I relinquished. And I said, mom, I promise I'll go to church at least

16:57:53:22 once. And to abate my anxiety, I said, I'm gonna go ahead and knock that out. Week one. When I was out there, I didn't even have a car yet. I found an apartment with some other students at the college, and I walked to the nearest Episcopal Church to tick that box off to tell my mother that I had gone to church. I really had no intention of pursuing a deeply faithful life of spiritual contemplation. I was in Southern California to see what the world had to offer. So the first Sunday I walked into this church, and

16:58:25:22 little did I know it, it was kind of a, a renowned church for social justice.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

16:58:32:06 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I just only went there because it was the closest Episcopal church to where I lived. I walked in the doors, and I don't remember what the priest said that day in his homily, but I do remember my experience at the communion rail. This was in the late eighties, and the AIDS epidemic had kind of hit an all time high and it would become a crisis. And in Mississippi, I didn't think I knew anybody that had AIDS or that was visibly dying from it. But when I approached the communion rail like I had done for my whole life, I put my hands out and I looked at the man kneeling next to me, and they probably weighed 70 pounds

Michael Chaney

16:59:05:09 soaking wet. And it was obvious he was dying of something. But he put his hands out and he looked at me and he smiled. And something registered in me that this guy had something. He was, he, he had something in his heart. And I was moved, I was very moved. I was so moved that I decided to go back to church again the next Sunday on my own. I had already fulfilled the promise to my mother, but

16:59:35:12 this was my choice. So I went and I asked where that man was after the service, and someone had told me that he had died that week. And it affected me deeply. And the same person I was talking to began to ask questions about myself. And then I asked what I was doing on Wednesday morning. I said, well, I guess I, I don't know, I have class at nine. And she said, well, what are you doing before class? I said, I didn't really have any plans, probably sleeping. And she said that they were opening a

17:00:04:01 new homeless shelter and they needed some help making oatmeal.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:00:07:17 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I felt cornered. I felt, okay, I should probably show up, get up early and go make some oatmeal. And that's what I did. And that was my first experience with homelessness. Again, in Mississippi, I'd seen abject poverty. I'd never seen anyone sleeping on a sidewalk on a cardboard box. And this deeply affected me as well. And I began to go back to this church because I wanted to be part of something. And for the first time in my life, I really began to understand what the

17:00:38:06 gospel was really about. I understood what following Jesus was about. It meant loving people unconditionally. It meant seeking justice and seeking right relationships in the community. And I wanted desperately to be a part of that. And that experience began to influence and affect the art making that I was doing at the time as I was beginning to study filmmaking, as I was beginning to study painting, as I was continuing to explore more deeply

17:01:09:08 what it means to create things and engage an audience with creativity and with art, and what does it mean to have a conversation and dialogue with someone over important issues. So that was a little bit about my youth and how I became invested in a life of faith.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:01:30:02 [Tom Kohler]: And then you show up in Savannah.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:01:33:07 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: How did that happen? So it, it took a long, it took, I took the long route back down south after I graduated from college. I, I worked a little bit in New Orleans. I went to graduate school in the Boston, Cambridge area of

Michael Chaney

Massachusetts. I lived in New York City after graduate school, and I was working in television, and I was working on what we now call branded content. And I was doing a lot of working for big corporate clients. And I felt like I'd checked my soul at the door, or

17:02:03:14 when I had entered the city, and I began to pine for meaning. I also honestly began to miss the South. And it's around this time that I read John Berendt's book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and thought, wait a minute, there's an art school down in Savannah. I wonder if I could be a part of that.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:02:20:12 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I sent an inquiry. There was nothing available. I made up with New York City, and we were getting along just fine. And then I got a phone call and they had asked if I was still interested in visiting Savannah. I said, sure. When they said, how about this week? And I said, okay, I guess I'll make some time for that. I came down to Savannah, had an interview. I really wasn't sure where, what I was thinking, but I, they made me an offer and I thought, okay, I can do this for 10 weeks. I'm gonna come down here for 10 weeks. I'll keep my apartment in New York. I'll go back after this is over. And I'm now 26 years into my

17:02:54:08 10 week plan. Something about Savannah spoke to me.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:02:59:14 [Tom Kohler]: What do you think spoke?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:03:01:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I think Savannah has a unique sense of community. I've certainly experienced community in larger cities. When I lived in Pasadena, California, even when I lived in New York City, my little neighborhood had its own community, but nothing quite like Savannah. It reminded me a lot of the diversity that I grew up with in my town in Mississippi. People felt affirming of one another in this community. There was a sense of culture, a sense of holding one another up, a sense of

17:03:33:06 affirmation. I liked that. It was interesting. I felt invited and compelled to explore Savannah. I remember one of the first, I remember, I remember Mickve Israel, congregation Mikveh Israel had an exhibition on Chinese Jews. And I thought, this is cool. This, this is the kind of thing that interests me. And I thought, if, if a town with a con with a, a congregation that celebrates this kind of diversity is around, that's,

17:04:04:00 that's kind of the kind of place I want to be.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:04:07:20 [Tom Kohler]: And you were ordained then.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:04:10:02 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So here's the thing. I, I struggled with an ordination or call. I, I struggled with a call to ordained ministry when I was in graduate school. I was walking through Harvard Square and I saw a sign that said, how do you answer the call? And it was a sandwich board. And it said, you know, conference today. And it was like a little path that led to this building. And I thought, why not? I got my coffee. I'm just gonna follow the path down and see what's going on there. And I walked up into the steps of the Episcopal Divinity School, and there I heard the

17:04:42:03 Reverend Carter Hayward, who was on fire, and she was preaching to a packed room full of people about answering the call and about what it's like to hear God knocking at your heart, and you know that you have to do something about it. And that woman looked clear across the room at me standing in that doorway. And I turned around and I ran, I'm not kidding, I'm not, I'm not exaggerating. I literally put one foot in front of the other as fast as I could. And I ran away from a call. That woman was speaking way too

17:05:13:22 directly to me, and she was speaking something that I knew to be truth and that I didn't wanna recognize.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:05:20:23 [Tom Kohler]: And

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:05:21:18 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I'd been in Savannah for a few years and I'd been involved with a couple of churches, and I found a lovely church home not far from where we are right now. And I, I pulled the priest aside one day and I said, I gotta, I, I gotta be honest with you, man, I got an itch. I feel like there's this nagging spiritual voice that keeps saying, Michael, you're supposed to be doing something more than what you're doing. And I said, maybe it's ordained ministry. Maybe I'm supposed to be doing something else. Perhaps, perhaps I'm being called to be a deacon. And, and I remember my priest at the time, he kind of, he kind of

17:05:54:06 chuckled. He said, yeah, you're right. Okay, come on. This is good. Let's go talk to our bishop. And I was like, wait a second. I don't wanna talk to the bishop.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:06:01:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I just thought I was having a moment of, you know, between the two of us. So he dragged me off to talk to the bishop, and I told the bishop how I was feeling, and I remember my, my dog was dying at the time. And

Michael Chaney

he said, where does God speak to you? And I said, my God speak speaks to me when I have to pick up my dog who can't walk. And I carry him outside so he can go to the bathroom. And when I pick him back up and I carry him back in and put him on the bed, and I, I see God talking to me when I sit on a park bench or square, and I talk to one

17:06:33:01 of my neighbors who's living outside. I see God when I see someone who's struggling with anxiety or depression, and I see God when I see a queer kid who's struggling with his own identity because he's afraid of what his parents might say. And my bishop started chuckling and kind of like talked to the priest and said, we, we, we, we need to talk about this some more. And so I went through, through the process, it's a very long process, and I kept telling God, you can't have me this. I'm just getting it outta my system so I can

17:07:03:17 say that I got it outta my system. And in the ordination process in the Episcopal Church, you have to sit through a period of discernment where you go into a room with people you may or may not know, and you tell them, I don't know if I'm being called to ordained ministry. I might be, I don't know. And I sure, I thought, for sure, these folks are gonna see through me. They're gonna say, don't worry about it. Well, no. After a year of that, they said, we think you're in great shape.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:07:28:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: We're, and I said, no, no, no. That's not, that's not the answer I was looking for. And so then I went back to my bishop and I said, here's the deal. I got a job. I got a kid on the way. I can't just give it all up to go to seminary. And he said, you're in luck. There's a seminary that has a program when you're off of the teaching schedule during the summer and during your Christmas break. I said, well, I don't know if I'm gonna connect to it. He goes, well, it's the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the same place. I couldn't run away from fast enough. It was the same seminary. I said, that's the only

17:08:01:21 place I'd ever want to go. So I hadn't, I, I, I had a choice, but it, it looked like the answers were pretty clear at this point. I went to seminary in a very unique and a wonderful program where a focus on anti-racism and anti-oppression for four years. My seminary training was about justice in the gospel. And it was riveting. I was one of the few straight white men in my class. In fact, I was one of two. And I loved it

17:08:32:06 because it took me outta my comfort zone. It asked me to get my privilege in check. It asked me to dig a little bit deeper about what justice means and what equity means, and what does it mean to be called into ordained ministry into a, a, a culturally rich and diverse world. And I liked it. I liked the discomfort, I liked the challenge, and I liked how it was

Michael Chaney

17:08:59:10 preparing me for ministering in my beloved city of Savannah that I had fallen in love with.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:06:23 [Tom Kohler]: So that, that was the question that was kind of rolled around in my mind a little bit. So you, you're having this experience and you're still rooted in Savannah, right? And now you come back and do you have a new set of eyes? Or, or is it just the, have your eyes been sharpened or, or how are you different and or, and what happens?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:30:05 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I wish I could say that I was like Paul on the road to Damascus, and the scales simply fell off my eyes. But that, it wasn't that simple. It wasn't that fast. It was, it was gradual.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:42:07 [Eric Darling]: Sorry, we're getting a little crosstalk.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:43:16 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah, I figured

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:45:09 [Eric Darling]: Maybe we can let it pass every time we stop. They,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:50:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I'm, I'm being too long-winded.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:52:07 [Tom Kohler]: No, I think we're fine. All right. No, no. You're hearing that you're hearing that, right?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:56:11 [Eric Darling]: Yeah. It was real loud for a second. Yeah.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:09:59:00 [Tom Kohler]: We'll shift, I mean, we'll shift gears in a minute to Okay. It's kinda like you say something,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:10:05:01 [Eric Darling]: It's quiet. Mike,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:05:21 [Tom Kohler]: When I think about you, I think about you coffee shops, think about seeing you with people. I think, you know, I think about you. I don't wanna Press to something like, this is maybe an old fashioned term. I sort of thing I a street minister...

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:19:13 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I'm down with that. We can talk about that. Yeah. Right. You

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:22:00 [Tom Kohler]: Know, we can get from there.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:23:16 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Sure.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:24:06 [Tom Kohler]: Then we'll be, then we'll be in Savannah in the street. Yeah. And Yeah. Okay.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:30:20 [Eric Darling]: Check.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:31:21 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:32:10 [Eric Darling]: They're probably moved on here because we're checking.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:35:00 [Tom Kohler]: Well, if, just close Steven's door. See? Yeah, I think he just close, close the room away. His door will be fine.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:45:08 [Eric Darling]: He might have been on the phone, but it sounded like there were two people talking.

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:10:50:05 [Tom Kohler]: Can can you just ask him to close this door to his office? Yeah, that's what I was gonna do. Okay. I need to don you to do that, right? Oh,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:07:11 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I'm turning to a gear head. I'm looking at all your stuff.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:09:17 [Eric Darling]: Oh, yeah,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:10:10 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: That's great.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:11:05 [Eric Darling]: I've got the Burano on order.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:13:07 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: What's the Burano?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:14:23 [Eric Darling]: The new Sony camera...

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:15:18 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: No, I don't know anything about it.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:17:18 [Eric Darling]: So you know about the Venice? Yes. It's the next camera in between the Venice and the FX nine. They've come out with a new model. Oh. So it's in the Cine Alta line.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:26:19 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh, great.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:27:16 [Eric Darling]: But it's, you know, it's got the internal raw, which is the reason I want to go.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:11:32:06 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh, wonderful. It's

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:33:07 [Eric Darling]: Got the, like six k lower version of it. It's, it's an eight K camera.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:36:19 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:37:00 [Eric Darling]: Lovely. 8.6 K.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:38:15 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Wow.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:39:03 [Eric Darling]: But you can roll it in a six K mode or 5.8 K or a 4K. And I have a set of primes that are super 35 that I can't use on these full frame cameras.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:48:22 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Right, 'cause yeah,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:49:08 [Eric Darling]: I'm sitting on the shelf and I wanna reemploy them. So now I, all right. I've just committed. So

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:53:19 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: That's a, that's a very good excuse.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:11:56:15 [Eric Darling]: You understand. I, I do eight KI don't really care about the eight K 'cause I can't use my prise with the eight K. Yeah, I know. Anyway, door's closed. All right, I think we're back at it to whenever you're ready. Sure.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:12:18:22 [Tom Kohler]: So you're back in Savannah and you're maybe seeing this community a little bit different way, or maybe not, and what happens next?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

- 17:12:30:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So, after, after seminary, or actually during seminary, I'm required to do things like clinical pastoral education. I gotta work in hospitals and learn how to be a pastor to people in certain situations. I started working at a, at another church that I wasn't familiar with to learn more about Christian education and formation. And I think that that gave me a insight to yet another other parts of Savannah that was unfamiliar with. And after seminary graduation, I was ordained as first a deacon, and six months later as a priest in the
- 17:13:01:21 Episcopal church. And my bishop understood that my bread and butter was going to be still being a college professor. I was gonna be bivocational. And what did bivocational mean to me in terms of boundaries and what my personal objectives were? I was fascinated still with the arts and how theology and art has a crossover. So I began to go out and start to meet and minister to people working in the arts in our community. And simultaneously that meant working, working
- 17:13:35:01 towards justice issues. I was fascinated with how I could help, or how, how I could be a part of racial reconciliation, how I could use or check my own privilege as necessary. I was interested in, in, as a straight guy, how do I work with my queer siblings towards justice in those areas. I was interested in how I could work towards environmental justice, and I've
- 17:14:00:17 still always been interested in how I can work towards eliminating homelessness. So I was assigned to a congregation. I was assigned mostly to area University students and to artists. I worked with an intentional community for a little while. It was an intentional spiritual community that existed for about two years. And I was a chaplain to that. And

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

- 17:14:24:10 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Something still wasn't quite there. It just felt like I was on the margins. And then some years after that, an opportunity came up. The diocese was experimenting with the idea of, I guess you could say it's an experimental church. It was a church without walls. It would still be a congregation. And I felt like that was speaking to me. It's hard to put into words, but my gut or my heart said, Michael, I think that's where you need to be. Maybe it wasn't my gut or my heart. I
- 17:14:58:00 think it was the spirit. And so I accepted that invitation, and that's where I've been since with the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany. And Epiphany is, I don't know what you would call it, it's still a church, but we didn't meet in a building. We met in squares, in parks. We met in houses, we had meals, we met in coffee shops. We met in alternative spaces. We met in our local L-G-B-T-Q Center for a while. We met in a theater for a
- 17:15:28:00 little while, and now we have actually moved into a church building. And we're part of what we like to see as a larger ecosystem of a lot of things happening in a building, not exclusively our congregation. And also, about five years ago or so,

Michael Chaney

well, about, I dunno, about a decade or so ago, my, I had my friend Jamie Mowry and I were talking, and we had

17:15:55:17 both been involved in a ministry while we were in seminary called Ecclesia. And when I was in Cambridge, I was involved with Ecclesia in Boston Common. And the group there was called Common Cathedral. It was a push cart and push it out to the middle of Boston Common. It had sandwiches on it, and you'd pop it open, you'd feed people. And then after people ate, the push cart became an altar. And we would have a service right there for the

17:16:25:04 people as the people felt comfortable. And we went to where they were. And Jamie did remarkable work of doing something similar here in Savannah at one of our homeless encampments.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:16:37:04 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: He created the community of St. Joseph, which was literally a physical community that he and I and other clergy who visited, were servants to, and we were visitors. And so we would go and we would establish relationships with the people who lived in tents. And we created a community where we could help them help each other. We saw a decrease in the violence in that community. We saw people getting housed. We saw people tending to one another's needs. And that was flourishing

17:17:10:19 until that camp was bulldozed by the city. And that's another story. But I also feel like some people said there's, you know, oh, there's the sacred and there's the secular. But I don't, I don't know. I feel like there's the sacred and the profane and the sacred is found in a cup of coffee with a friend. And, and the sacred is found sitting on a park bench, having a conversation or watching the sunrise with a new friend. The Sacred can be found in our daily lives, not just in a church building

17:17:39:07 on Sundays or Saturdays or whatever day you worship. The sacred is found in all places at all times. We only have to open our eyes and our hearts and our minds to experiencing that. So I think a lot of my theology has led me to places like coffee shops, to, to the streets, to sitting with people, to marching in, to marching in parades, to showing solidarity and support with my neighbors who have been marginalized. And that's where I feel like I am

17:18:10:21 today, still sitting there with people I deeply care about and waiting with them and working with them

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:18:21:06 [Tom Kohler]: In a given week. I mean, if I were to follow you around, what would I see?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:18:27:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Well, gosh, what do you wanna start on Sundays? You know, you got church, okay, you got things that happen after church. You got people who are in the hospital that need a visit. You got folks who could text or call you and say, my grandfather's on his deathbed. Or, I just lost my dog and somebody broke into my tent. You respond to folks, you respond to folks as they need to be responded to while kinda keeping my own boundaries in check, because I have a family, and I've also

17:18:57:19 got a job. I roll into the classroom at eight o'clock in the morning, and I'm there till three. And in the afternoons I try to go grab a cup of coffee with somebody, or sometimes I'll, I'll drive by where I know someone camps or sleeps on the sidewalk, and I just hang out and chat for a little bit with them. I might write emails to folks to who make policy and talk to them about the experiences that I'm seeing in the streets. I visit our legislators. Sometimes I bring a friend who's experiencing homelessness with me so that

17:19:29:12 they can hear firsthand what our housing crisis is doing to our community. I try to be a friend to people. I try to be a pastor. I try to be a presence to remind them that they're never alone. That there's something deeper and richer and spiritual in our lives that connects us and binds us to all of creation. And that they're part of a wonderful tapestry. They're woven right in.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:19:56:12 [Tom Kohler]: Who else in Savannah is kind of walking that path with you? And particularly if there are people walking that path that come from other faith homes, who would some of those people be?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:20:07:03 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I have a, a, a little not, it's not a cafe klatch, it's a c it's a clergy klatch - unlike other clergy, we hang out together. It is like Robert Haas, who's the rabbi at Mickve Israel and Billy Hester, who's over at Asbury Memorial. David Messner, who's now left Savannah, who's at the Unitarian Church. And of course, I've got my own little posse of Episcopal priest that we all hang out together. But I, you know, it's things like, I remember a few years back, the Islamic Center here in Savannah got tagged with some really hateful graffiti. And Robert

17:20:41:08 Haas called me in the morning and said, did you see what happened? I said, I did Rabbi. And he said, come on, put your collar on. We're going, it was a Friday. And he came to my house and picked me up, and we drove down to the Islamic Center, and we went there for prayer. Him and his kippah and his prayer shawl, and me and my collar. And we showed our Muslim siblings that they are not alone in this community, that other people in the community have their back. And I think about that, and

Michael Chaney

17:21:09:19 I think about the, the, the kind of caring deep soul Robert is to call me and tell me we're going. He didn't ask. He told me. So I, I know that, I know that there are people who are doing it. Jamie's still in town. He says he's retired, but come on, man, that guy, he's still, he's still out moving and shaking while

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:21:33:22 [Tom Kohler]: He was on stage at there naming of the, of the renaming of, of Calhoun Square.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:21:38:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I heard, I'll admit that. I missed that. It was in Atlanta for my other job. I heard it was a good time and it was overdue. Yeah. My buddy Kevin Veitinger used to be used to live here. He's moved. I miss him deeply. He had a calling at another church outside of town. Kevin and I were partners in crime. We drive around and sit and talk to people and work together kind of as a co-ministry team.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:22:03:00 [Tom Kohler]: Do you have contact, like, like with like the Korean Baptist Church or, I mean, there increasingly, I see like there was a, a Chinese Baptist church, the Korean, the Baptist church, et cetera. Do you have contact with those kind of churches or people from those kind of congregations?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:22:21:22 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh, no, no offense to get the Baptist. I just don't have a whole lot of contact with 'em. I, I mean, Jimmy Carter, he was a Baptist. I'm just, no, I, you know, it, it depends. There's a, so there are a couple of communities in Savannah. One is called JUST, which is a justice driven community of all faiths, which I'm a part of. And yes, so there's, we have Baptist and Methodist and Presbyterians, and we've got Roman Catholics, and we've got Episcopalians and we have non-Christians as

17:22:52:00 well who are, who are involved. Rabbi Haas is involved. So the, there's, there's, there's talk, there's discussion, there's, there's a network of clergy who deeply care about these issues and strengthening the bonds of our community.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:10:05 [Tom Kohler]: I'm going to describe something we heard earlier this morning and just get you to react to it, if I may. So we had a, someone I've known for a, a long time who's active at Savannah Christian, I now call Compassion. And she gave us, told us about several different ministries, one of which was a ministry that focuses on women that are stripping for a living.

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:29:07 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh, yeah.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:29:21 [Tom Kohler]: And 10 women from the church have gone for 10 years and gone into the clubs and their husbands sit in the parking lot and they are present and bring food and listen. And I, I'm curious, did, is there anything about that that causes you pause?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:51:13 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: No,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:54:16 [Tom Kohler]: Because I, I was,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:23:58:12 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:24:03:01 [Tom Kohler]: If, if, if I were going to try to label your kind of inter-denominational, your kind of ministry and the kind of the, the way you go into the world as someone who is a minister, how would I describe that?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:24:18:13 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: How, how would you describe?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:24:20:06 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah, or how would you want that described?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:24:20:23 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: How I go into the world? Yes. Yeah. I, I mean, I grew up, I grew up a weird kid. You know, Mississippi is a pretty conventional place. And I, you know, I'm probably on the autism spectrum somehow. I got ADD, I'm, I'm a creative, I'm constantly, you know, going on a walkabout in my mind. And that didn't really quite fit in with the conventions of the place where I grew up. So I'd always kind of felt like an outsider. So when I started to minister to people, I was drawn to the margins, I'll be honest. And, and I, and when I started to really reread

Michael Chaney

17:24:54:17 the gospels, Jesus was drawn to the margins. You know, the Ethiopian eunuch, you know, he's like, come on man. The, the, the, the, the people that he met, he fed them first. He fed them. He the woman at the, well, the Samaritans, they, he crossed boundaries.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:25:14:19 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: And that's the kind of thing that, that that tells me I wanna be a part of that. I want to transgress the cultural boundaries that we've instituted to keep people separate. I want my faith to break that down. And if that means that I'm gonna, you know, I support someone who's of a different faith tradition, so be it. If it means that I need to feed someone, so be it. If it means that I'm gonna support someone

17:25:46:10 who's going to, going, going to bring a sandwich or a word of hope to a sex worker, so be it.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:25:54:18 [Tom Kohler]: What, what's the most radical thing you think you've done wearing a collar?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:25:58:05 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: You want me to say that on camera?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:26:01:11 [Tom Kohler]: I'm gonna count on you to say whatever you want to say.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:26:08:00 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: You know, I remember, I remember going, I got no problem going into bars, is wearing my collar. And I know that for some people that's an issue, right? But it's like, I like a beer every now and then. And I remember going into the Legion one time I was where I was getting off of outta a church service. And, and on a Wednesday night or something, I went in and I saw Sarah behind the bar. And she's like, Halloween was over six weeks. Six months ago. And I'm like, Sarah, you do know that I'm ordained. Right? And her jaw dropped. She says, no, I guess I didn't. So I was relatively, you know, new. And sometimes, sometimes I like

17:26:42:10 to go to, I go into bars and I like to go to dive bars wearing my collar because I, inevitably, someone's gonna ask me a question like, are you here for fetish night?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

- 17:26:53:17 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Or are you really a priest? Which is a true que that's an, that's an actual question I, I heard. So that always leads to a conversation. And if I can have an honest conversation with someone and I can establish a rapport or relationship with them, great. I'm not there to judge. I'm not there to proselytize. I'm there to witness, I'm there to be a supportive voice and to remind people that they're not alone. I'm there to be a pastor. And yeah, I think you can be a pastor in a bar. I think you can be a pastor at, I think I know you can be a pastor at a, at a rally. I was honored when the mayor asked me to speak at our Black Lives rally March in 2020 on the steps of the Capitol. And I get it. I, I, and I spoke about my own privilege and I spoke about the fact that people who look like me, me need to support people of color. And we need to support real honest justice. So I, I, I did the same thing at like a, a trans rights march last year. I was honored to be asked to be there and to speak. I get it. I'm, I know my position and privilege, I, I, I want to be able to speak from a place of support and to talk to people who are, who look and are from the same place of privilege as I am, to understand what that privilege is and how they can use that for a more just and equitable world.
- 17:27:30:01
- 17:27:58:06
- 17:28:26:20 So yeah, I've been to a couple of, I've been to a couple of rallies wearing my collar. I've been to some bars. What's the most radical thing I've done? I don't know. I think radical is sitting on a cardboard box with somebody and sharing a sandwich. Because a lot of people just don't wanna look at someone. I remember going through Johnson Square, you, you get to know people. You get to know their names and you become more comfortable with them. And I, you know, I remember go walking through Johnson Square and
- 17:28:56:00 seeing, seeing a friend Darien, and, and, and literally sitting on his box with him on the cardboard in the middle of the square. It's, the tourists are coming through completely ignoring him until I sit down and all of a sudden they're gonna look, if I can bring, use my privilege to say, guess what? You can't turn away from the fact that people live outside. Or, and then two weeks later he OD'ed and, you know, had to trace him down at the hospital. We didn't know if he was alive or dead, but I went to the
- 17:29:26:16 hospital to visit him. 'cause that's what you do.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

- 17:29:31:16 [Tom Kohler]: What other places have you been? I mean, that brings up, what other places have you been to be present to people? You've been in hospitals, you've been under bridges, et cetera. Keep going. What, what other places

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:29:44:03 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Where I've been present to people wherever they need me to be. I've been with people in, as you said, hospitals in bars, sometimes sharing a sandwich on a sidewalk. I've been with people in parades. I've been with people in protest rallies. I've been with people in their own houses of worship, which may be different from mine. It's wherever I feel called to be and where I, I feel like I'm serving. Yeah.

17:30:18:21 You name it.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:30:23:19 [Tom Kohler]: Can you imagine growing old together with someone as a radical act?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:30:28:10 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah, it is. It's funny. So like yesterday was Valentine's Day, but it was also Ash Wednesday. And on Ash Wednesday in the Christian tradition, we are reminded of our own mortality. It's a day that we smudge ashes on our foreheads and tell ourselves that it's from dust that we came. And it is too dust that we shall return. We are mortal. The short message, the homily for that day is we're all gonna die. Like it

17:30:59:07 or not, it's gonna happen. So what do we do with ourselves right now? How did we reorient ourselves to that thing that is sacred and holy and all encompassing of creation of which we are all apart? How would it re we reorient ourselves to that, which is now we're in the period of Lent, but since it was on Valentine's Day, I was also thinking about, you know, my own marriage and my own children and that radical act of being in a relationship. And my wife's gave me a really beautiful card. She says,

17:31:30:18 sometimes we roast marshmallows on this dumpster fire. And it just, I say that's why I love her. 'cause sometimes it is a dumpster, dumpster fire. You just make the best of it.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:31:44:05 [Tom Kohler]: Are there questions that I can ask you that would allow you to say something that you've not said so far?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:31:54:17 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I don't know. I just, I feel like I've been talking about myself and I feel like I should be talking about this community.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:32:03:22 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I guess we can do that. Me come. I'm curious. That's... I'm gonna come to that from the other side a little bit. Do you see things that you consider to be almost like, I mean, like in politics today, there's an awful lot of performance politic. Sure. It's just not taking us anywhere. It's performance politics. Do you see the same thing with regard to the idea of interfaith?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:32:34:21 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: So I think sometimes, certainly with politics and interfaith dialogue, there's performance politics. There's virtue signaling of like, yeah, we get along and put our hands around each other and then we go, when we make policy that negates, annuls, nullifies what it is we just did. Y you know, it's like, you can't say we care about the people who li are living on the street and then turn around and create policy that doesn't create affordable housing. Sure. Sometimes and too

17:33:05:15 often we go to our houses of worship on the weekend and then we check out of that for the rest of the, the rest of the week for the next six days. It's all about business as usual. That's about the status quo. And I think we have a responsibility as people of faith to push back on status quo.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:33:25:09 [Tom Kohler]: Who do you think is doing some of that heavy lifting right now in the faith community in terms of getting outside their own congregational walls, maybe their own personal wall and pushing forward, who, who are some of the people that are really trying, working on that matter?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:33:39:13 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Who are trying to get out of their own comfort zone? And I, I mean, I always go to my Episcopal colleagues. Guillermo Arleta, I think is doing great work in the community, particularly with just David Lindbergh has a big heart for people who are unhoused and also connecting with other folks in the community. Hunt Priest

17:34:10:22 is doing some remarkable work about that intersection of psychedelics and spirituality. I'm trying to think who else, who's coming to mind. I'm probably gonna walk out and, you know, kinda kick myself in the head. Billy Hester, Billy's unafraid to talk to people who aren't Methodist. He hangs out with me. Robert, certainly, I mean, this is my own, this is my tight little circle. And I'm sure there's lots of folks, gosh, you know,

17:34:45:09 Scoggins Berg is doing interesting stuff with One, he used to have a church here in town, but now he's working on policy and he's working towards like, AIDS relief in Africa. And he, he, he'll call me in a heartbeat and be like, Hey, can you go to Washington DC I'm like, no. But thank you.

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:35:09:17 [Tom Kohler]: Are there stories you've heard, I mean, just in the years or stories you've heard about, examples of faith in action in the past in Savannah that have been inspiring to you, that might come from Civil Rights movement or might come from other, other moments in time here that have been those kind of stories and tales that you've been able to catch.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:35:31:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah, but I forgot. You know, I, I welcome to

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:35:34:15 [Tom Kohler]: My

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:35:34:17 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: World, right? I mean, I know, I know that there are stories from the Civil rights era. I, I'll say that during the Black Lives Matter protest, we saw a lot of faith communities coming together. We saw a diversity of people who were coming together across race and faith and numerous other barriers to, to step up and to speak for, for Black lives. That was exciting. We've seen it with Creation Care, with

17:36:09:07 Speak Creation care is, we, we, it's kind of a catchphrase. It means environmental justice. And when we talk about environmental justice, we also have to talk about environmental racism. So where I, I think some, yeah, folks are coming together. I, I'm seeing more people concerned about

17:36:34:20 homelessness now. I don't know if we're going to what we can do other than provide direct relief until housing inequality is really addressed. That's my soap box.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:36:48:03 [Tom Kohler]: No, no, I hear you.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:36:51:00 [Eric Darling]: I wouldn't mind getting his sort of general take on Savannah's housing issues and

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:36:58:05 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh, I'm gonna get myself in trouble. Well,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:37:00:00 [Eric Darling]: I mean, in, in general platitudes, right? Yeah. Not pointing fingers at specific figureheads and what have you, but just sort of like acknowledging that it's an issue is sort of the first step. Right. And it seems that that's starting to happen a little bit more. Yeah. As you've already alluded to. But I think that it's not, it's not peculiar to Savannah, but it's especially like the high, it's high relief in Savannah. It's pretty, it's pretty sharp. Yeah. What's happening? And so, I

17:37:30:03 don't know, I think that's sort of a, it's, you know, it's bringing people together in a way that is perhaps going to finally address an issue that needs, needs to be addressed. I mean, that's just sort of my own words. But anyway, I I, I would like sort of your general take on that issue in general because it is sort of an issue that's bringing Savannahians together,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:37:52:05 [Tom Kohler]: Responding.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:37:57:07 [Eric Darling]: Does that make sense? I'm sorry

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:37:58:12 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: To No, totally. So when I, when I first moved here 26 years ago, I was captivated by Savannah's charm. It reminded me a lot of the town that I grew up in a lot. It was a historic town in the South. It had a lot of Spanish moss, it had a lot of charming people. It had a lot of eccentrics. I like eccentric people sometimes. That might be one of them. And I, I quickly fell in love with the place. And like everyone who comes to Savannah, you're charmed by the Historic District. And I live just on the edge of the Historic District as I've, I've lived

17:38:32:07 there for 25 years. I lived on Gaston Street for a year, and then I got a house in a neighborhood nobody wanted to stop and visit in, which now is quite desirable. But over the years I've seen the downtown historic district change. I think we've all seen it. It's become a tourist mecca. It's become almost like a theme park. And that means the folks who actually live there can no longer

17:38:58:17 afford to live there. They've been displaced. And I've seen a new Savannah arise. And it's places like in Starland or in the Waters Avenue corridor or places that I'm still learning about. I'm learning about places like I'm, I'm learning about East Savannah. I'm learning about neighborhoods in West Savannah that are now places of renewal. We still though are part of what's

17:39:29:13 happening nationally with the housing crisis. There are folks who have three or four houses while so many have none. Rent is climbing. People just simply can't

Michael Chaney

afford a place to live. And that's the root cause of homelessness. People can ask, well, is it mental health or is it substance abuse?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:39:48:14 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: No, it's not being able to afford a place to live. It's that simple. Our pancake supper and Strove Tuesday, I spoke with a woman who, for the first time in her life is living in her car and she's 74 years old and she's been living in a car for four months because she lost her lease on her apartment. And she just can't afford a place to live. And she's a eloquent, well-spoken, wonderful conversationalist. She's quite passionate, but she simply can't afford a place to live on her income living in her car. I don't know what to tell her. I sit with her, I listen

17:40:22:14 to her, and I, I feel the injustice. I, I I want to go rent or a place to live, but I can't. So we're part of what's happening on a kind of a much larger scale. And I know all politics is local and, and we have to kind of look at the broader cultural picture of who we are as a country and who we are as a people and what our priorities are. So, Savannah is certainly part of a national trend towards unaffordable housing. And we're gonna have to

17:40:53:13 create some policy and we're gonna have to create some incentives for remedying that we have to create a system where people have a place to live. What that is, I don't know, I'm not a policy wonk, I'm a pastor. I've been reading a lot about it. But we have in Savannah a lot of places that people could live in. There's a lot of old places that could be redone. We could

17:41:19:07 create a revolving fund. I'm a huge advocate for something called Housing First, which is part of harm reduction. It means you put somebody in a house first, then you can address substance abuse issues. Then you can address mental health issues and physical health issues and establish work relationships and a landlord relationship. But if you try to do all that stuff first as a precursor to getting into a house, they're barriers. It also solves, saves money. And that's, that's statistically proven that it

17:41:48:23 saves money. Putting someone in a house first and then addressing those issues. We have the resources to do it. It's whether or not we really want to allocate those resources.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:41:58:17 [Tom Kohler]: And it may be rethinking what the word "we" means.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:42:02:12 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah. We, yeah. Who's we? We is all of us. Even if we don't want to be part of, we, because our actions have an impact on our neighbors. Everything that we do, whether we choose to smile at somebody or bark at them

Michael Chaney

over our morning coffee, whether we choose to wave at them at a stoplight or give 'em the middle finger, that's gonna have an

17:42:27:14 effect on our community. Does that answer your question?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:42:38:16 [Eric Darling]: Yeah, that's good. Good, good, good stuff. Thank you.

17:42:49:12 [Tom Kohler]: So you remind me of Sammy Clark.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:42:53:02 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I don't know Sammy Clark. Do I?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:42:58:02 [Tom Kohler]: Go talk to some old, old Savannahians.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:03:13 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Alright,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:07:05 [Tom Kohler]: I'll leave it at that. Okay. Billy knew him, right? Yeah. Let, let's end it there. Just do some research on Reverend Sammy Clark.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:15:14 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I, I'm gonna tell you, I'll tell you something I hadn't shared with too many people, and I don't know where this is going. I, I had two job offers last year outta state. They're pretty good. I didn't wanna leave Savannah. Right.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:28:21 [Tom Kohler]: Were they in more progressive towns? Yeah. More progressive cities. Well, you know, you do mission work, right? Yeah. Okay. That's about it. Dammit.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:37:08 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: That's

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:38:14 [Tom Kohler]: Right. Yeah. Right. Seriously, stay here. Here's where you're needed.

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:44:22 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I, I, you know, I've, I've gone through that with folks who are like, well, why do you wanna stay there? It's like, well, you know, I'm part of something that's

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:51:12 [Tom Kohler]: Worth it too.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:52:11 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah. It's worth it. I'm part of something. We're doing good work.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:43:55:06 [Tom Kohler]: That's right. Because I'm easy. Go live in Asheville. Right. Or go live in,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:00:09 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Can't afford to live there. No. But

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:03:09 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. Good. Alright, well thank you very much. That's

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:06:17 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: All I have. Did I answer all your questions?

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:09:09 [Tom Kohler]: Well,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:10:00 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:10:09 [Tom Kohler]: We've been at it for 12 hours. Yeah. And that's, I think two things. One, we've been here and we've been here, what other people have to say. So in totality, we have heard a lot today.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:24:10 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Okay. And,

Michael Chaney

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:25:09 [Tom Kohler]: And you, you're part of that much bigger kind of picture. Okay. So for like, for example, just we had a good long kind of

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:34:04 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Description. Okay, great. Good.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:44:35:15 [Tom Kohler]: I'm saying so I mean, when I put this whole thing together, at least in my mind and I'm thinking, we have heard a lot of stories today about ways that people of faith have figured out how to be, to cross boundaries, connect and do things with the common good, which is what we're looking for. There's lots of those stories. And we've heard stories about how individual people have personally decided they personally want to get out of their own comfort zones and what a friend of mine was called, their own relationship ghettos.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:45:02:23 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Yeah, that's cool. Yeah.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:45:04:04 [Tom Kohler]: Their own relationship ghettos and, and be with a, a broader group of people.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:45:08:18 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Can I, can I speak to that and, and try, I'll try not to, to preach a homily here I might a little bit. Which is, I, i, I deeply believe that, you know, you wanna call it the cosmos. You wanna call it the great spirit, you wanna call it God, whatever you're comfortable with. There's a cosmic fabric that we are all woven into. Every faith tradition should I think point us to acknowledging that we are part

17:45:39:00 of something and that we are part of something really good. And that faith tradition should cultivate goodness, that faith tradition should cultivate the beloved community. So it doesn't matter if you're a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim or Hindu or a Buddhist, or Zoroastronist, our tradition should bind to us together. We're on similar paths, all leading toward the same destination. Let's have some respect from one another and let's shoulder

17:46:15:17 the burden on the road. 'cause we are pilgrims together.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

Michael Chaney

17:46:21:00 [Tom Kohler]: I think that's our close.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:46:23:04 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Okay, good.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:46:24:03 [Tom Kohler]: Thank you. Alright. That was great. That was a short homily. That was okay.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:46:28:10 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: I wish my congregation probably is thinking, I wish you preached that short on Sundays. That was,

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:46:32:13 [Tom Kohler]: Well that's that joke. I've never heard, I've never heard a bad short sermon or I've never heard of short speech, that joke.

SCMP-A-DAY1-0006

17:46:39:18 [Rev. Michael Chaney]: Oh yeah. Like, do you know Frank Logue who's the bishop? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So yeah, Frank actually preached my ordination and my bishop at the time, he says, dang Frank, that was three of the best sermons I've ever heard. He was a little long winded, Clever backend.