

WE ARE ALL WITNESSES IN TEAM-BUILDING
I Corinthians 12

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
21 September 2014

For today and the next three weeks our worship theme comes from a verse in the book of Hebrews: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus...”

This passage refers to the Olympic marathon, and other similar races of the ancient world. Runners would come into the arena for their last lap and be cheered on by all of the people in the stands. The author of the book of Hebrews uses this metaphor for the life of faith. Imagine that you’re running the race which is your life, and just like with a physical race, some laps feel better than others. Some miles seem to last forever, all you can focus on is your aches and pains. Other miles seem to fly by, and you feel as if could run forever. Perhaps life is like that. Perhaps the life of faith is like that, too. Sometimes it’s easy to be hopeful and faithful; sometimes God seems very near. Other times God seems distant and we have to fight despair and apathy. But we are not alone. There are those people in the stands. Who are they? Well, for one, they’re the people in the pews surrounding you. We are not here to compete with one another but to cheer each other on. The people in the stands are also the people who have gone before us in the faith. It is, if you will, a heavenly cheering section. Think of the people who encouraged you in the faith, and I realize not everyone had these role models, but many of us can think of parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors,

friends. In this church we have ancestors, the men and women who built this church, who left a strong foundation for us. All of those people are cheering us on. They have their eye on us, they're watching for us to enter the arena and when we do, they're on their feet. We are not alone.

And now, if I may switch my athletic metaphor just a bit, imagine that it's not a marathon but a relay race. Our mentors have run their lap, and they've passed the baton to us, and now it's up to us to run our very best, and then pass the baton to the next generation. While we do that, while we run our race, while we live our faith, we're witnessing. We're noticing where we see God in the world, and we're telling others about it. Just as Dan and Deanna did so eloquently this morning.

We are all witnesses. And this morning's scripture suggests that we are all witnesses as we work together. Paul describes the church as a body. Each part of the body is valued and needed. I'm going to use the word "team" this morning, but it's the same concept. When a coach is putting together a football team, he needs to think about filling each position with the best athlete for his position. If he has 25 excellent quarterbacks come out for the team but not a single kicker, he can't have a team. The quarterback usually gets the most attention from the fans, but the quarterback's only as good as the rest of the offense and defense. Each position has a critical role to play. Sometimes the coach's job is to help each player find that particular position that he's best for.

On the church team, we have many more positions. From people who work in the gardens and paint, to people who count the money to people who usher, greet,

serve Coffee Hour, deliver doorstep dinners, to people who rock babies in the nursery and teach Sunday School and chaperone the mission trips to people who sing and ring...the list goes on and on. No one is more important than a Sunday School teacher who is sometimes one of the first persons to teach a child about God's unconditional love. But if we had a church full of Sunday School teachers, the choir loft would be empty, and the church would fall into disrepair. Each one of our gifts is needed.

One of my favorite things to do is help people connect their interests, their passions, with a ministry of the church. When you're doing something you love, when you put your whole heart into it, you'll do it well, and your joy will be contagious. No one ever becomes great and doing something they don't love, something they consider a duty.

The world needs us to be the best team we can be. Statistics came out this week that 1/3 of Cleveland residents, and more than 50% of its children are living in poverty. We need the best mission team we can put together. We need to be involved in our sister church in Ohio City, we need to put together successful food drives, we need to build more Habitat houses.

Because heroin addiction is a growing problem in Cleveland's suburbs, because more teens are experiencing anxiety and depression, we need to support our youth ministry team and make sure they have every available resource to help our young people.

We need a strong Stephen Ministry team because loneliness is an epidemic, because one caring friend can make a real difference in a time of life crisis.

Because there are churches where all people are most certainly not welcome, the world needs us. Because there are too few places keeping hope alive, focusing on work that makes a positive difference, because the planet is fragile and peace is too often illusive, the world needs us to be the best team we can be.

This church has many strengths for which I am grateful. For each area of ministry which is going well, there are people who have (to give you one more athletic metaphor) stepped up to the plate and shown leadership. It's a tremendous blessing, but we can't stop and be complacent. The world needs us to be all we can be.

I have a church fantasy. In my dream, each member of this church is personally contacted at least once a year. I would love to be the one doing the contacting, but even in my dreams, I realize that's not possible. But a conversation takes place. And each member is asked, "How can the church help you connect better to God this year?" We would hear ideas for worship, for small groups, for service projects, for classes. Then each member is asked, "What is God calling you to do in the church this year?" All of the church's mission and ministry opportunities are discussed. The member signs up to usher a couple of times, serve Coffee Hour, and become trained as an IHN volunteer. The member shares a dream of his or her own. What if we tried something new? The interviewer talks about how that can be tried. Sometimes the member says, "I can't do any more than worship this year. I have young children and a full-time job." Or "I'm caring for a spouse with a serious illness." And then the interviewer would find out how the church can help in those situations. The interviewer would ask, "Do you need help finding friends here? People who are in similar life circumstances? Can we

help you connect?” At the end of the conversation the two pray together. It’s a team-building conversation, where each person realizes that his or her gifts are needed and wanted, and that the church wants to rally around and help wherever possible. I would love it if we could find a way to make that dream a reality.

The great preacher Howard Thurman once wrote this, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” I’d like to think that we could try that philosophy here and say, “Don’t ask what the church needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the church needs is people who have come alive.” I believe that God is the best team-builder, and that if we each tapped into our best selves, and brought forth those God-given talents, somehow the church would have each position filled in the ideal way.

What I’m trying to say is this. Each person here is invited to be a part of this team. You don’t have to be an official member. Maybe it’s only your first time here. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want a sense of community, more friends, people who share like values. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want to live with a sense of purpose, believing they’re contributing to a cause greater than themselves. There is something for each of us to do, and the church will be respectful of individual circumstances. I would love to help you find your place on this team. There’s a uniform in every size.