

BE THE CHURCH: SHARE EARTHLY AND SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

Romans 12:2-18

Kelly B. Brill
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Avon Lake UCC

Why do people come to church? There was a time, around the 1950's, when going to church was almost expected of anyone who wanted to advance either professionally or socially. In some communities, you were looked at askance if you were not a church-goer. Not to say that there weren't people then who went to church for other reasons, but church-going was simply a way of life.

Those days are gone. Now, participating in a faith community is a definite, intentional choice. I want to thank those of you who make that choice, who make this congregation what it is. I know why some of you are here, because you tell me your stories:

You're here for community. Some of you have family in the area and some of you don't, some of you have lived here your whole lives and some of you have moved here recently - but you are here for the sense of community the church provides. You're here to be around people who share your values, a belief in the inclusive unconditionally loving God who calls us to lives of service...you're here as parents to be with other parents who are raising children at the same time, because parenting is difficult alone and we need one another. You're here as those who are on the grief journey, and know that there is comfort to be found in the company of God's people.

You're here because you're struggling with the challenges of daily life...juggling your various responsibilities, shouldering the worries that come with paying bills, finding time for all that you want and need to do, feeling pulled in so many directions. And here you experience

sanctuary. Worship is an hour out of your week but it's an hour that helps you put the pieces of your life together in a more healthy way, at least that is always my hope.

You're here because the problems of the world seem overwhelming, and it brings you hope to be a part of a community that is sheltering and building houses for the homeless, feeding the hungry, providing medical care in India, opening our doors to those who have been rejected in other places.

You're here because you want your children to learn that there is more to life than material success.

You're here because our nation is bitterly-divided and many people are more fearful than they have been in a long time. And in a time such as ours, we need to be together. We need to remember the good news - we need to hear it, proclaim it, share it, and live it. We need to be the church. We don't all agree on political solutions, but we all agree that there is much work to be done, in our nation, and in our world, to create the kinds of communities God intends.

One Sunday a year, on the day of our Annual Meeting, I use the sermon as an opportunity to assess where we are as a church. I draw inspiration from one of the creation stories in the book of Genesis. In that story, God spends six days creating. Now we're not meant to take that story literally, but there's a profound lesson in it. At the end of each day's work, God stops and pauses. In Hebrew, the word "stop" and the word "sabbath" are the same word. God takes a mini-Sabbath after each burst of creativity. God looks around, assesses all the work that has been done, and says, "It is good." Then, after the six days, God takes the entire seventh day as a Sabbath day, a time to stop all other activity, a day to appreciate what has been accomplished, a whole day to rest. Let me ask you, "Do you ever stop? Do you ever really rest?" Even God rested! It's good, it's healthy, for us to stop and look around, reflect. Look at the children you've raised, the food you've prepared, the volunteer work you've done, the walls you've painted, the friends you've cared for. Look around and say to yourself, "That's

pretty good work.” I recently met with someone who has been through major change in her life in a short time span. She was feeling frustrated that a few minor commitments had slipped through the cracks. To my ears, I was amazed that through it all, she has maintained her relationships, her health, her job...I encouraged her to take a moment to consider all that she had accomplished. She looked at me, and said, “I guess you’re right!”

So we take a moment, on this Annual Meeting Sunday, to catch our breaths, and to look at where we are as a church.

We have a beautiful building on a gorgeous piece of property, and we owe our thanks to all of those paid and unpaid workers who help to maintain it. My thanks to our custodial staff, our Saturday Morning Work Crew, our landscaping volunteers. Our property was enhanced this year with the addition of the prayer labyrinth in the woods. We believe that this building and this property is not just for the enjoyment of the members of this church, but that it is ours to share, so we open our building nearly 365 days a year. We host 3 AA groups a week, scout groups, music groups, and many other community events in addition to the activities of our own busy congregation and our preschool.

As wonderful as our property is, our biggest asset is our people. WE are the church. Someone recently told me that it’s a shame that we call our building “the church” because really, church is people. That’s why I love our “Be the Church” theme - it reminds us that church isn’t about something that is built with brick and mortar; it’s something we do, it’s who we are, and it’s constantly growing and changing just like all living things.

Our mission statement is “Growing People to Serve God and Others.” We care about the growth of people at all ages of life. We are currently experiencing a baby boom in our congregation; our annual report lists a record number of baptisms. Our Sunday School program is bursting at the seams. We were delighted that 101 children participated in our Christmas pageant this year. In order to provide the best program in Christian Education and Faith

Formation that we possibly can, we are on the cusp of hiring a new Associate Minister for Children and Families. This individual will oversee our current programming for children, develop new ministries, and be a part of our pastoral staff, with duties in preaching, pastoral care, weddings and funerals. You will hear more about this individual very soon.

Nate Taylor oversees the growth of our youth as he meets with the Junior High Group, the Senior High Group and the Confirmation class. Our adults have opportunities to grow spiritually through small groups, Bible study, CrossTraining classes and Stephen Ministry.

Our passage from Romans reminds us that each of us is given spiritual gifts and each of our gifts is necessary for the health of our whole church, just as each organ is necessary for the health of the human body. What that means is that if you haven't yet found a way to share your passion or talent or time with the church, we are both missing something. I've mentioned our ministries with children, youth and adults, I've mentioned our work to maintain and beautify our property - it all depend on dozens of volunteers. So whether you want to weed the flower beds, teach Sunday School to the preschoolers, be a confirmation mentor to a youth, or whether you want to learn to ring handbells, sing in the choir, volunteer with our audio-visual team, be a part of our worship band, believe me, there is a place for you to serve. Please contact me if you aren't sure where you fit in or what your first step is. There's no part of my job I enjoy more than matchmaking - connecting people with ministries that would bring them a sense of joy and purpose.

Do you know what an elevator speech is? It's a short answer to a complicated question. An answer you can give in the minute and a half which is the average length of time you spend on an elevator. When people ask me to describe our church, when they say, "What does your church stand for?" or "What makes your church special?" one of my elevator answers is "Our church strives to be Mission Central, a place where people can come when they want to become involved in life-transforming work, a place where they can, as our mission statement

puts it, serve others.” So let me tell you about a unique project we’ve recently launched...it’s nothing I ever would have imagined this time last year.

I attended a Lorain County UCC clergy meeting last year and heard about several churches in our county which are struggling, barely keeping their doors open. I asked if there was a way that our church could help - would members like to take part in our programs, since their churches are too small for many programs, for example. So we started dialogues with several churches. The head of our mission team, Pete Barth, said to me one day, “You know, some of these churches would have more financial resources if they had a thrift shop like we do. Do you mind if we talk to them about how to start one?” That creative idea is taking off. Several people who call themselves the Thrift Shop Posse have written a business plan, based on our successful Good Neighbor Thrift Shop. We are going to launch the first “franchise” if you will, on the west side of Cleveland, to benefit St. Paul’s Community Church in Ohio City, then we hope to launch another one in Lorain county. If you would like to volunteer, at the Thrift Shop here in Avon Lake, or at one of the new stores, please let me know.

Members of our Finance Team came across a disturbing piece of information this past year. When they analyzed the church’s income, they discovered that 45% of our giving comes from members who are 70 and above. It’s probably obvious that that is an area of concern. If we’re going to continue to be able to support our current level of ministry and mission in the future, we’ll need to broaden our base of support among our younger members. I am excited that we have several new members of the Finance Team who are aware of this challenge. If you are not aware, we do ask all those who participate in the church to give financially as they are able. You may give via text, you may give online, we have a giving kiosk in the Gathering Space area, and there are always envelopes in the pews. I’m happy to answer any questions about ways you can financially support the church.

This past year has been a difficult one for our nation. I am counseling individuals who are feeling anxious about what it means to live in such a polarized country, a polarized world, really. I am counseling individuals whose families are feuding because of political differences. One of the things I advise is, simply, "Be the church." It sounds simplistic, maybe. Naive, perhaps. But I believe it with all my heart. If we dive into the work of the church, we will find meaning and purpose for the living of these days. Regardless of what happens politically, there are people in need of compassion who need the listening ears of a Stephen Minister. Regardless of what happens politically, there are people who need affordable housing, and assistance with food. There are people struggling to break free from addiction and the cycle of abuse. Our community is making a difference, and we are needed, now more than ever. Thank you for being the church.