

MISSION POSSIBLE: GROWING PEOPLE TO SERVE GOD AND OTHERS
2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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Three of us from this church were invited to a meeting on the west side of Cleveland on Thursday morning. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss a possible initiative to help support urban ministry. We were given a tour of a UCC church that is over one hundred years old. We walked into the sanctuary. It is obvious that this was once the home of a thriving worshipping community. The sanctuary was beautifully designed with stained glass windows and a pipe organ that has now fallen into disrepair. Someone asked the pastor about worship attendance. She said, "40 is a really good day. We almost never have 40."

Bricks are falling off of the outside of the building, creating such a hazardous condition that the city of Cleveland will fine this church \$945,000 if it is not repaired.

Our group talked about the ways we could help this new urban ministry initiative, and then I was left with this thought, which has remained with me these past few days. Our institutions are very fragile. That particular church is physically fragile, as well, because of so many years of disrepair.

One week ago, we learned that Pilgrim Hills camp has been sold. Pilgrim Hills was, for decades, one of the two camps that were part of the Ohio Conference United Church of Christ. This church has been shaped enormously by that sacred space. It's not at all clear to me that Nate Taylor would be working here, or at any church, if it weren't for the spiritually formative experiences he had at Pilgrim Hills, almost three decades worth of summer camp, and I'm pretty sure he would agree. Many of our

leaders trace their faith formation to Pilgrim Hills. My own children's weeks at summer camp were transformational. We hope and pray that Templed Hills, our remaining camp, will be that kind of sacred space for many in the future. But we are reminded that our institutions are fragile. Probably it is the case that trying to maintain two summer camps for so long, but - in my opinion - a lack of leadership led to both camps being kept open and neither being properly maintained, and now we have a large task ahead of us to make Templed Hills a space that can be used for all our programming needs.

I don't think I'm being overly dramatic or manipulative in saying this morning, on this Stewardship Sunday, that this institution, this church, is fragile. We have a solid foundation. We are the oldest church in Avon Lake - founded in 1896. We have a beautiful well-maintained property, from our grounds to our buildings. We have a history of strong lay leadership, and currently literally hundreds of members serving as volunteers in many capacities and giving generously of time, talent and treasure. We are incredibly blessed to have a wide range of ages, newborns to nineties. It is not bragging but simply a fact to say that most mainline Protestant churches would be envious of our many strengths. Yet it still true that we are fragile.

The future of this church depends, entirely, on how committed we are to it. I want to thank our Stewardship speakers this year who have each spoken so eloquently about what this church means to them - we began with long-time members Jim and Valerie Tanzilli. They were followed by newer members Jonathon Whittlesey and, last week, Nelle and David Doyle - and today we have heard from our Finance Team chair Scott MacDonald. During the offering today we will see a video created by Tim Schulz that will show some of our church's mission and activities in pictures. And now in these

few minutes it is my turn to talk about the importance of our ministry from my point of view.

Today I want to encourage you to support the church **not** so that the church will be here for our grandchildren. Today I want to encourage you to support the church so that it will be here today and tomorrow. This year, next year. Of course I hope with every fiber of my being that this church will thrive for centuries to come. But my focus isn't on the distant future. I'm full of concern for the present moment. I am so aware of how much our ministry and mission is needed now.

Just a few examples, and I'll begin with the one that is the most personal to me.

2016 ended in tragedy for the Brill family, with the news that the opiate epidemic that has hit so many families had claimed the life of our brilliant 27-year-old nephew, Russell. Not only was I grateful for the loving support of this church family that helped Doug and me as we sought to support Russell's immediate family, but I have been enthusiastic as our church has, in 2017, begun relationships with two post-addiction support facilities in Lorain County. In two weeks you will hear from two representatives of Primary Purpose recovery housing and addiction services. Last week I hosted a meeting of ministers from Bay Village and Avon Lake. We watched a video that was produced by St. Barnabas Episcopal Church about what parents need to know about addiction. The video features our own member, Mark Spaetzel, the chief of police in Bay Village. We are going to make the video widely available to the congregation and use it in parenting sessions over the coming year. St. Barnabas is the site of a support group for parents that meets twice a month and that has been incredibly helpful to members of this congregation who are dealing with the ripple effects of addiction and trying to cope

in healthy ways. When it comes to an issue like opiate addiction, the old adage, “It takes a village” becomes more than a nice saying. It really is true that the entire community needs to work together - schools, law enforcement, social services, families - churches are an essential part of the fabric of the community. Our Mission Team has made this issue a central focus. Our support is making a real difference.

Almost every week, I hear from parents who are struggling to raise their children in this new and complicated world. Just last week, two parents dropped by. They have one child in college and one in high school. On the outside, these are students who look like they have it together. They look happy and well-adjusted. They are high-achieving. Yet both of them have had serious bouts of anxiety this fall. Our students face pressures that seem to be accelerating. Some experts say that as many as 40% of American teenagers suffer from anxiety. 40%.

Social media contributes to the problem. If you don't know the term, cyberbullying refers to harassment that takes place online. Last Monday I was driving to meet two colleagues for lunch and was horrified and riveted by a story on National Public Radio. The person being interviewed is a counselor in the Boston area who deals with the issue of school anxiety. His clients are students who wake up in the morning, check their phones, see the nasty things that were said about them overnight, and are paralyzed, physically unable to go to school that day. This is now becoming so common that it is the specialty of a counselor. This is the world in which some of our students are living.

How important is it then for us to have a place like the Buoy, youth ministry programs where students are taught about compassion and empathy? How important is it for them to encounter people like Nate and all of our volunteers who show them ac-

ceptance and unconditional love, and give them experiences where they can relax and laugh and be themselves? It is critically important. We are offering an alternative culture, we are combatting the trends, we are offering sanctuary.

This fall we have seen one natural disaster after another and the worst mass shooting in American history. Other news events keep us reeling, as we worry about the threat of war, the health of our planet, the polarization in our nation. Worry upon worry. It isn't just our students who are anxious. Yet the church keeps on being the church, in season and out of season, as scripture tells us to do. We are housing the homeless, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, visiting the lonely. We are celebrating births and baptisms, engagements and weddings; we are holding each other up in times of difficulty and sorrow. We are painting faces and pumpkins and going on hayrides, helping one another find jobs. We are singing, ringing bells, playing music, planning for Christmas. We are reading and studying together. We are strengthening our friendships with those of different faiths in an effort to understand one another.

We are being the church. We are keeping hope alive. We are growing in our faith, trying to grow in wisdom and maturity so that we can serve God and all of God's people in this particular time and place.

Yesterday several of us heard Shane Claiborne speak. Shane is a writer and, really, a full-time Christian who is part of an intentional Christian community in inner-city Philadelphia. He is a prophet for our time. He talked about the importance of community and relationship. In these days, that are so fraught with worry and anxiety for so many of us, it is vital that we choose to be around people who share our values. As he put it, "If you want to be generous, choose generous friends. If you want to be joyful, spend

your time with people who are joyful. If you want to be courageous, hang out with courageous people. Seek out positive peer pressure.” We are not a perfect church, but here you can find people to strengthen you on your faith journey.

I encourage you to help our church stay strong from the inside out. If you have suggestions, comments, even criticisms, please let me know. Talk to another staff member or leader. Don't hesitate to make your voice heard; this is your church, this is our church. Speaking the truth in love is our biblical mandate. Going directly to another person when you have a concern is always the best first step. Treating each other with kindness, respect and dignity is the way we practice in here, in this safe space, the way we want the world to be out there.

It is a lot of work to maintain a healthy growing church but it is also joyful and meaningful. I pledge to you that I will continue to do everything I can to help this church thrive, be a beacon of hope in this community, meet the spiritual needs of those here and reach out to those who aren't yet here, and proclaim in word and in deed the good news that God is with us, we are not alone. Thank you for joining me in this holy work, the work of our lifetime.