

CHOOSE HOPE: HOPE FOR THE CHURCH

Acts 2:37-47

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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Sometimes it seems that life is just one clumsy fumble after another. You forget to pay a bill and so you get hit with a late fee. You try to make a joke with a friend and you end up saying something insensitive that hurts her feelings. You plan a dinner, spend a lot of money at the grocery store on ingredients, but it turns out to be a flop. The day you need to be at work early is the day you find yourself on the side of I-90 with a flat tire, waiting for AAA to show up.

But then there are other days. Days when the meal you prepared turned out even better than expected - and you and your dinner companions become engrossed in a wonderful conversation and you think, "It doesn't get any better than this." Mornings when you wake up and realize you've had a really good night's sleep and then you're energized all day long. You take a walk in the metropark, and you pay attention to the color of the leaves, the blue of the sky; you are completely present and grateful for the beauty that surrounds you.

Treasure those moments, those moments when you get it right, moments that appear as pure gift and grace. Remembering those times helps us through life's more frustrating moments; they provide perspective and remind us how life can be at its best.

Our scripture this morning is from the book of Acts - Acts should really be called Luke, Part Two. Scholars believe that both Luke and Acts were written by the same hand. Whereas Luke tells the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, Acts describes the community that follows Jesus in the next several decades. It is the best description we

have of what the early church was like, the struggles they faced, what they believed, the way they lived.

Jesus is the head of the church but Jesus is not its founder. During Jesus' ministry, he focused on the present moment. He was not interested in establishing another religion; he wasn't trying to turn his band of followers into an organized structured group. Jesus' focus was on the people in front of him and the message he was called to deliver. So when Jesus is no longer physically present, his friends begin to flounder. They don't have a sense of direction.

The story of Pentecost tells of the transformation of this group. The word "Pentecost" simply means fifty. You can hear and see its connection to the prefix "penta" which means "five" - as in the Pentagon is a five-sided building. Pentecost was a Jewish festival that took place fifty days after the Passover. So as the book of Acts begins, Jesus' followers are gathered, fifty days after the events of Holy Week.

On Pentecost, they're given purpose. God's spirit blows in with energy, bringing enthusiasm. Peter (who we'll talk more about next week) begins to preach. He says to Jesus' followers, in essence, "We know what Jesus has meant to us. We know what a difference his life and teachings have made in our lives. Now it's our turn. Now it's up to us to keep the message of Jesus alive."

On that Pentecost Day, the church is born. This group of disciples, followers and friends of Jesus, are no longer looking backwards, remembering his life, still shocked about his death, still marveling at his resurrection. No, they are now looking forward; they are people with a mission.

Listen again to this description of what the early days of the church were like:

“The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.”

That is a picture of the church at its best. These first Christians are embodying the message and spirit of Jesus, they are engaged in what one writer calls “resurrection practices” — sharing meals, sharing possessions, caring for those in need, being hospitable to outsiders, worshiping regularly, and doing it all in a spirit of joy. They are forming themselves by what they do every day. They are living their values.

If you were to continue reading in the book of Acts, you would see that the church doesn’t remain in this idyllic state. Conflicts arise, of course, because the church is made up of imperfect people. But during those rough patches, when debates grew heated, all of them could return to the story of the founding of the church — they would remember the time when the church was at its best, living its purpose, and that memory would help them to find their footing again.

I have begun reading a book about church which a parishioner has given me. It’s written by a pastor, and I was struck by the very first words in the introduction. Even though a full-time professional minister wrote these words, I believe they could apply to

every one of us..."Blessed are the people who get the opportunity to devote their lives to something bigger than themselves, and who find themselves surrounded by friends who share their passion."

Is there any better way to think about church than that? Is there any higher calling for our lives than that? Being a part of a church is the best way I know of to devote ourselves to something bigger than ourselves, for the church opens up dozens of doors of service. We all have different interests and talents, and so we all want to serve in different ways. We have a place for you if what you want to do is rock babies on Sunday morning in the nursery. If food is your thing, we have meals that need to be prepared for the homeless shelter and for our own members in times of need. We have projects inside and outside the church if you like to paint or rake leaves or if you have technical skills. We partner with churches in the inner city of Cleveland, with Habitat for Humanity in Lorain County, and with numerous other social service agencies, and we would be glad to help you find a way to serve one of them. If you like toddlers or teenagers, we have a place for you. If you'd like to visit our members who are homebound or in senior living facilities, we will match you up. If your heart is broken open by the refugee crisis or the environmental crisis, you might like to be a part of what the United Church of Christ is doing in terms of advocacy. Blessed are the people who get the opportunity to devote their lives to something bigger than themselves.

AND...blessed are those who find themselves surrounded by friends who share their passion. Life is meant to be lived in community. I'd be lying if I told you that the church is the only place to find it. I know that some of you have multiple circles of

friends - long-time friends, neighbor friends, work friends - and if that's the case for you, I'm glad. Relationships enhance life.

I know that for many people, finding friends who share their values is difficult. One of the reasons we offer so many opportunities for you to get to know one another in the church is because we want you to find people here with whom you have something in common. Parents who are at the same stage in life and can support each other...people who share an interest or a hobby or who are walking a similar journey. If you haven't found that yet in this church, let me or Beau know and we'll help. Or sign up for one of our workdays or CrossTraining or any small group activity. I guarantee you there are people here who share your passion.

This morning I want to talk to you about this particular church at this particular moment in time. Just like our brothers and sisters 2,000 years ago, we are far from perfect. Many days we don't get it right. Not every sermon is eloquent, not every meeting is productive, some times we treat each other badly. But we are inspired by the times in which we feel confident that we know what God wants us to be doing.

Nate came home from the Mission Trip this year and told me about one student whose life was changed. This student hadn't really wanted to go; in fact, he almost didn't go. But in the course of the two-day bus ride to and from New Orleans, working side by side on home repair, singing in worship every night while linking arms with new friends, sharing highs and lows of the day in small group sessions, something shifted. And this young man who was reluctant became a leader. He began talking about his faith and what the mission trip experience meant to him. Church at its best.

A family in our congregation experienced more than their share of difficulties last year...I can't describe them here, but they faced monumental challenges. Because of the resources of this church, we were able to offer help in a number of ways. For months, I saw the struggle on their faces; I could almost see the burdens they were carrying. But then one Sunday morning I noticed that they looked a little happier. And the next Sunday there seemed to be a sense of "lightness" about them – as if their burdens were not quite so heavy. And now, when I see them I think, "They are Easter People; they have experienced a sense of resurrection." Church at its best.

Last Wednesday night, we enjoyed a fabulous home-cooked meal in the Fellowship Hall - new people, long-time members, people of all ages, and then we went into the Chapel for worship. Beau began by singing a song that includes these lyrics, "Just know you're not alone; I'm going to make this place your home. Don't pay no mind to the demons, they fill you with fear; the trouble - it might drag you down. If you get lost, you can always be found. Just know you're not alone; I'm going to make this place your home." The chapel became more and more full. People were bringing in chairs. I stood in the back and listened to the singing, so grateful for this place that feels like home. When we left worship, we dispersed. The senior high kids went to the Buoy, their home away from home. Eileen Zakel had games planned for the children. One intergenerational group had fun making crafts together, and over 50 adults engaged in an hour of education - a book study, a discussion about the beliefs of the UCC, and a session on climate change. Church at its best.

At our annual congregational meeting in January, we're going to be voting on our goals for the next five years. I have written this proposed purpose statement:

“We believe that we are called to be people of compassion and justice, the way of life described in the Bible and modeled by Jesus. We form ourselves into disciples through the regular practices of worship and study.

To that end, we strive to create impactful worship experiences to enhance spiritual growth and age-appropriate faith formation opportunities (Sunday School, youth groups, Confirmation, adult education, CrossTraining, retreats, etc.)

Given that loneliness and anxiety are rampant in our culture today, we seek to create community – offering meaningful relationships for people of all ages and circumstances. We seek to create and maintain networks of caring, providing tangible support in times of life change and crisis (programs such as Stephen Ministry, parish nursing, Doorstep Dinners, support groups, and social gatherings)

Given that the needs of the world are urgent, we seek to engage in meaningful mission and service, working with local agencies and supporting the work of the global ministries of the United Church of Christ. We promote participation in hands-on mission activities, including mission trips, believing that they create a sense of hope and encouragement.

All of our ministry and mission programming needs a financial base and a physical home base. We encourage regular giving to the church which supports our staff, utilities and ongoing maintenance, and makes it possible for us to open our doors for community groups (like Scouts and AA) whenever we can. We encourage gifts to the Endowment Fund and to periodic capital campaigns which fund longer-term improvements to the facility.

We strive to be welcoming to all; one of our goals for 2020 is to craft a statement of welcome and inclusion.”

The Avon Lake UCC is a source of hope for people within the church and for all of those we seek to reach through our ministries and mission. We are not perfect but thanks to each of you, we are growing and healthy. We have a history of which we are proud, but our best days are yet to come. We are making an impact on those within our congregation and all of those whose lives we reach. My husband and I make a recurring gift to the church; a donation comes from our checking account twice a month. We invest in this church because it is our home; we give because we believe that the ministry and mission of this church is keeping hope alive. The reality is that a growing congregation requires more resources. As we continue to add programs, we need to add staff hours and be able to fund other resources. Please join us in supporting this congregation with your gifts of time, talent and treasure. Every gift makes a difference. Let's choose hope together.