

TOGETHER
Isaiah 43:18-19

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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Imagine with me. Imagine that each person who is a part of this church family walks into this sanctuary. Each of us is carrying something, holding something very carefully, because it is precious, it is personal. Some of us walk up here to the chancel and place what we are carrying right in front of the holy table, or on the chancel steps, or at the foot of the cross. Some of you place what you are carrying on a pew, perhaps the pew where you most like to sit. Pretty soon the church is filling up with these precious possessions. They're on the chancel floor, they're under the piano. They're in the aisle ways, they're on the chairs. What is it that we are carrying? We are carrying our stories.

Each of us has a life story, and none of them is the same as another. There are similarities, of course - glance at someone's story and you can see graduation diplomas, marriage licenses, pictures of children and grandchildren, you notice travels, accomplishments. Most of those parts of our stories are fairly easy to talk about. Those are the things that come up when you meet someone for the first time, those are the things you might talk about at a cocktail party. These aspects of your life make up the outer shell of your life.

But what happens when you really get to know someone, when you trust someone enough to tell that person about your inner hidden life, your pain, about the broken places in your life story? If these precious packages that we see strewn about the sanctuary could speak, they would tell these stories - stories of divorce, addiction, bankruptcy.

If I listen carefully, I can hear our life stories speak. I can hear the echoes from around the room, and this is what they say: "My adult children don't speak to each other",

“I once caused an accident in which someone died,” “I’ve spent time in prison for a white collar crime,” “I live in fear that people will find out what kind of person I really am,” “I disappointed the person who loved me the most.”

These are the most vulnerable parts of our stories, and we all have them. Stories of heartache, loss, grief, broken dreams, failures.

When we walk into the church, we don’t only bring our bodies, we also bring our stories. Most of the time, we protect our innermost stories, but if they’re always hidden, they don’t have a chance to heal.

Now imagine with me once again. Imagine that you now see threads which connect our stories. Each life story is unique, yes, but we also have commonalities. One color thread connects everyone in the church who has lost a child. Another color thread connects everyone in the church who is struggling to overcome an addiction. Another one connects everyone who has ever been falsely accused, another thread connects everyone whose child is struggling with gender and sexuality issues.

Now the church has become a tapestry. There is not one story that is not connected to at least one other. When you look at this tapestry, you can see that you are not alone. We are bound **together**.

I once attended a small clergy workshop in which the participants were given this exercise. Describe your approach to ministry using the first words that come to your mind. The first person spoke and it sounded like he had attended Harvard Business School. He had a sophisticated understanding of leadership and management techniques. The second minister, the one sitting next to me spoke next and he sounded like a published theologian. He spoke in lofty terms. Then it was my turn and I said simply, “One thing I love about being a minister is matchmaking.” Now I’m not talking about romantic

matchmaking (although I have done that as well) but I love connecting people in the church who have something in common. People who have common interests and hobbies. I love connecting people to the right outlet for ministry and service. But what is most meaningful is connecting people who have common stories, especially common stories of pain. You don't really need to know about people who have common stories of joy or triumph. But when you connect with someone who has faced an adversity similar to yours, then you know you're not alone. You can learn from each other and support one another. There aren't too many places where you can trust that your story will be treated with compassion. **I hope that this church is one of those places for you.**

And I want to remind you that we are here to support one another in this time. If you could use pastoral care, if you think you might want to talk to a Stephen Minister, let us know. We have monthly support groups for caregivers and those who have a family member with a mental illness. Next month we will have a pre-holiday grief support session. **We are not alone. We are in this together.**

And **together** we worship the God who has created each one of us, created us to be unique and yet connected. **Together** we worship Jesus who loved stories, who told stories about all kinds of people, so that everyone who listens will realize that they have a place in the one universal story of love.

In Wednesday morning Bible Study we are discussing together a book entitled Inspired. I want to read to you a short passage from the book which many of us found compelling in last week's discussion - here's the way Jesus is described in the chapter we read last week. These are the words of author Rachel Held Evans: "Jesus came to teach, to heal, to tell stories, to protest, to turn over tables, to touch people who weren't supposed to be touched and eat with people who weren't supposed to be eaten with, to break bread,

to pour wine, to wash feet, to face temptation, to tick off the authorities, to fulfill Scripture, to forgive, to announce the start of a brand-new kingdom, to show us what that kingdom is like, to show us what God is like, to love his enemies to the point of death at their hands, and to beat death by rising from the grave.”

Because of the good news of the gospel, each of our life stories is connected by sacred threads to the story of Jesus. **Our lives find meaning** as we follow in his footsteps. **We act in courage** as we remember his risk-taking. We become more **extravagant in love** as we watch all of the people he embraces and eats with. And our fears are diminished as we proclaim on Easter that **death and evil do not have the last word.**

The church is not a perfect institution, and ours is not a perfect church. But the church is the primary group of people responsible for keeping this sacred story alive and sharing it with everyone who needs the good news, and with the coming generation. For that reason, among many others, our support of the church really matters.

In this sermon series, we have been recalling that most of the people in the Bible are not secure and comfortable. Most of the time God’s people are on the move. Think of the 40-year Exodus, the decades-long exile. Think of Jesus spending the night in the desert and the wilderness, constantly on the move. These stories remind us that we are not alone as we wander through our own uncertain time, with no definite end point.

In the book of Isaiah, God says, “Don’t dwell on the past, don’t keep thinking about the way things used to be. Can’t you see that I’m doing something new? I’m making a way in the wilderness, I’m bringing water to the dry places in the desert.” God is making a new and better future for us. Let me say that again. **The witness of the Bible is that God is making a new and better future for us.** That is not what we’re hearing in the

media right now. That's not what we're saying to one another. It's not what we say to ourselves when we wake up, terrified in the middle of the night. Everywhere you turn there's another story of doom and gloom. Maybe it's the end of democracy as we know it. Maybe it's the end of civilization. Maybe we won't survive all of this.

But God says, "I am making a new and better future for you."

God **is** making a way for us to journey through this time, not just survive it but live with meaning as we work with God to create that new and better future. We can't do it alone but **we can do it together**.

I am so proud of what this church has accomplished in its 125 year history and I'm so proud of what we've done together in the last eight months. Together we are feeding the hungry, together we are learning about social and racial justice and engaging in hard conversations. Together we are preparing our building so that when we return in person we will have rooms where people of all ages and abilities can meet and learn. We are reaching out to those who live alone, sustaining in prayer those who are anxious, providing opportunities of joy to our children and youth. Together we are creating and recreating ways to worship which connect us to the divine and keep alive the practices of our faith. Together we are making new stories, stories of resilience and generosity. Your gifts of time, talent and treasure are making all of this possible.

One day Jesus saw a woman at the well of Jacob. They had never met before, but he knew her life story, every painful detail of her five marriages. When he recited her life story to her, all of her shame dissolved. He told her his story, his life purpose, they talked together, they laughed together, and he said he would be eating in her village that night. Here's Rachel Held Evans again, describing the woman at the well and her new passionate sense of herself: "I had to tell the good news to everyone I could think of. The

widow next door could host a banquet. The blind beggar from the alley would certainly come. Perhaps the lepers would join us, and maybe a tax collector or two. We could gather figs, bake bread, drink wine. We could fill a house with hungry and thirsty people, people ready to laugh again, and eat, and start something new.” That scene, where people of all political persuasions sit down at a meal together, where people of different ethnicities find commonalities with one another, where people of differing abilities all are valued, where everyone comes knowing that their story is safe: that’s a glimpse of what God’s new and better future will look like. Let’s help bring that future into reality. Together.