

LOVE: THE MUSCLE OF RESILIENCE
I Corinthians 13

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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One of the in-person events I missing this year is the authors' series sponsored by the Cuyahoga County Public Library. I have been attending these events for several years with friends from my book club and other friends who love to read. Each year there are three authors in the fall, and three in the spring; some very famous, some favorites, some who are new. One night in March of 2014, I was sitting in the balcony of the Ohio Theater waiting for that evening's author to speak. I hadn't read any of his books; hadn't even researched him. I knew nothing about him.

He appeared on stage and frankly didn't look as impressive as his bio suggested. But it took less than ten minutes for me to be utterly captivated, so taken with him and his work that later that year I read the book he'd been talking about - and as you can see, it was a commitment, a 700-page commitment. It's one of the books I've thought about most often in the past six years.

This is Andrew Solomon; the book he was talking about is entitled Far From the Tree. The book began when Solomon was given an assignment to write an article about deaf culture. He was surprised by the assignment itself - "what do you mean by deaf culture?" This is what he said about his mindset at the time: "I had thought of deafness entirely as an illness: those poor people, they couldn't hear, they lacked hearing, and what could we do for them? And then I went out into the Deaf world. I went to Deaf clubs. I saw performances of Deaf theater and of Deaf poetry. I even went to the

Miss Deaf America contest in Nashville, Tennessee, where people complained about that slurry Southern signing.”

He began to think about what it was like for the parents of children who were born deaf - many of them were not hearing-impaired themselves. Many of them began their journey feeling terribly sorry for their children, for the challenges they would face because of their lack of hearing. What often evolved was that the children grew up and taught the parents about life from an entirely different perspective. Solomon interviewed many people who conveyed this opinion - “You look at us and see what it is that we lack. We look at each other and we don’t think of ourselves as people who lack hearing; we think of ourselves as people who belong to a different culture than you do.”

Solomon has a prolific imagination. He began wondering what it would be like to be the parent of a child who was born with dwarfism, the parents of a child with Down Syndrome or autism. He wondered about being the parents of a child who committed a crime; he ended up spending days with the parents of Dylan Klebold, one of the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre.

I can’t summarize a 700-page book in a few minutes. The reason I bring it up in this sermon is this. At the end of it, after I read about so many different kinds of families - about children with schizophrenia, child prodigies, those with disabilities, those who are transgender, so many who would be labeled and called “other”, I was left with a certain knowledge that the author who spent years researching and writing about these people was a person of both empathy and compassion. He is not a researcher who kept his subjects at arm’s length. He cares about human beings and about how his work can improve life for anyone who’s been marginalized or misunderstood. If you

don't want to read the whole book, it's easy to just read the one chapter you might be interested in — and I also highly recommend Andrew Solomon's Ted Talk (https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_love_no_matter_what) which is quite similar to the lecture I heard in 2014.

In that talk, he says this: "I decided to have children while I was working on this project. And many people were astonished and said, 'But how can you decide to have children in the midst of studying everything that can go wrong?' And I said, 'I'm not studying everything that can go wrong. What I'm studying is how much love there can be, even when everything appears to be going wrong.'"

This month we are talking about resilience as a quality that will help us thrive in this moment in time. Two weeks ago I talked about the resilience of a Jewish woman during the Holocaust who deliberately chose to strengthen her inner life before she was taken to a camp. Last week Beau talked about his wife's grandfather who survived in a POW camp during that same war, by summoning the resources of his heart and mind. As I thought about how I would define resilience, and what those two people had in common, it occurred to me that true resilience isn't possible without love. You might survive without love, you might be tough enough, gritty enough to get through something with a competitive spirit. But resilience draws upon something deeper — to be resilient during a time of crisis or challenge, you need to have a reason. WHY do you want to survive and thrive? Because you love the gift of life, because you love other people, because you love yourself in a healthy and whole way...and because you know that the God of love has created you to live with joy, meaning and purpose. Resilience is motivated by love.

Parents of children who are in any way different develop a resilience muscle that becomes toned and strengthened by practice and adversity. They learn to love when it's hard, and when they're tired, and when the person they love is ridiculed.

Some of you who are watching today know this story because it is your story. It is your child who doesn't fit in, your child who is bullied or called names. Some of you know that you don't love because your child is attractive or intelligent or athletic; you just love. One couple, parents of a child with Downs Syndrome told Andrew Solomon, "If our son David had not been born with Downs, his life would surely be easier in some ways and every parent wants that for their child. But we have become better people because of him. Kinder and more purposeful. We wouldn't give it up for anything in the world."

What they have developed is the resilience muscle, motivated by love. Determination is important, so is discipline. Those qualities help us survive a time like this one. But will they help us thrive? Will they help us emerge into the post-pandemic world with our values intact, our spirits intact? Resilience is determination plus love.

When I think of resilient love, I think of the stories of people I have been privileged to come to know in my ministry. I think about the time I visited two dear saints of this church, Gordon and Lorena Miller - a few of you will remember them. He was quiet; she had a fun personality. They lived in a neat house with a view of the lake, one of those streets north of Lake Road. I was visiting because Gordon was ill. After a while, I realized that he was so weak that he could barely walk. Then I began looking around the house and I didn't see a bedroom on the first floor. I said, "Lorena, where's your bedroom?" "Upstairs," she said. "How do you get Gordon upstairs at night?"

“Well, she said, ‘I kind of put him over my shoulder and drag him and pull him, a step at a time. Sometimes we stop and we laugh at our predicament but we always make it.’”

A visiting nurse would have been appalled at the situation and certainly would have recommended a hospital bed downstairs. But what I remember is the love, the tough persistent love. Not love that’s easy, but love that’s resilient. Love that does what is needed, what seems impossible.

When I think of resilient love, I think about David Updegraff’s parents. I did not know them well, but I will never forget them. When I was asked to officiate at his mother’s funeral, I came to know their story. David’s mother lived with Alzheimer’s the last 12 years of her life, and for almost all of that time, David’s father was her caregiver. Every single day, he would dress her in clothes that were clean and that fit and that matched. Every single day, more than once a day, he would put lipstick on her. And then everything else of course, that comes with caring for someone who can no longer care for herself. But it is those other details that I remember most. Imagine the resilience it takes to love someone who can’t love you back, not just for a week or a month, but for twelve years. And then imagine that you love that person so much that you want them to look their best even though that takes extra effort, extra time, extra energy.

After I read Paul’s description of love at weddings, I often include Frederick Buechner’s description of marriage...and I believe these words have meaning for those who are not married as well...they could describe a philosophy of life, and how we choose to live with love. Buechner says this - “what you are promising is to love one another, whether you feel like it or not.”

We don't always feel like being resilient right now. We don't always feel like caring for others. Sometimes we don't feel like caring for ourselves. Sometimes we feel like going back to bed or staying in bed, vegging on the couch, doing anything to avoid thinking about the news, the virus. I do think we all need more rest in these days, but we also need more reminders that we are loved by the God who wants us to thrive, the God who creates us to fulfill our potential.

I also often read this passage at funerals. It's especially appropriate when we celebrate the life of someone whose life was marked by extravagant love, but also, Paul tells us what he thinks heaven is like: a place where we see God face to face. Read this passage in different versions of the Bible, and you'll hear it put in different ways - it's always a magnificent description to my ears. "Now we see in a glass darkly - or now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face to face." The point is that there will be a time when we see God face to face. But now? We can also glimpse God now.

I see God in the faces of health care professionals who show up to work every day bringing their best selves. They know they're treating some people who tried their best not to catch the virus and others who didn't try at all. Each patient is treated with care.

I see God in the faces of teachers who are coming up with creative, imaginative ways to keep students engaged. One teacher I know has an in-person classroom in front of her, and then some students on zoom on her laptop. All day long she goes back and forth, paying attention to both groups at the very same time. She is resilient.

I believe we glimpse God's love in the faces of leaders who are begging us to do the right thing in this time - to be as careful as we can, for the sake of those who are most vulnerable.

No one FEELS loving every day. But we can CHOOSE to act in loving ways. The dictionary defines resilience this way:

“The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity.”

We are learning that resilience requires elasticity, the ability to quickly change. We've changed as researchers are learning more about the virus. Laws and rules change quickly; flexibility is key. The point is that we **WILL** spring back. And the world we want to return to is a world that is more loving, more compassionate, more generous, more like the world God intends for all of us. May it be so. Amen.