

RECONNECTING

Acts 2:42-47

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Ross Gay grew up in an urban neighborhood in Philadelphia. He now lives in Bloomington, Indiana where he teaches writing at Indiana University.

One of his favorite childhood memories is spending time at the home of his friend Jay - Jay's father had a beautiful backyard garden where he grew all kinds of produce they then served at the family restaurant. Ross loved this oasis of green and decided that when he was able, he would become a gardener himself.

So when he saw a notice in the local paper that a group of Bloomington residents were meeting to discuss a community orchard project, he put the date on his calendar and joined a hundred or so people in City Hall. Soon he was part of the Site Preparation committee and then the plant selection team. People wrote grants, loaned each other tools, turned compost - the project was off and running. Each week he participated in long board meetings, made tolerable because everyone brought homemade food.

He describes the orchard volunteers as laughably incompetent. They're professors, they're people who care about food insecurity - they spend four or five hours trying to write the contract for the land the city is giving them. Finally they reach out to a lawyer friend who completes the job in fifteen minutes.

But as this orchard committee is meeting together, Ross realizes, there's more going on than discussions about which kind of fruit trees to buy. They're becoming a **community**. Here's how he puts it in an essay about the community orchard project:

“The inefficiency, the incompetence, the ineffectiveness, the dismal rate of production, the wandering, the listening, the dreaming, were all just **ways of being together**. It was hanging out, it was growing closer, its product was itself, its product was **connection**, friendship, it was care. All of a sudden I began to be a part of conversations like this - “I’m making jam on Saturday if anyone wants to join me.” “Let me help with hauling the limestone.” “You can leave your kids with us as long as you need.” “Take my car.” “Whatever equipment you need - just look through my garage and shed.” That was the product. Our needs offered to each other, held to each other, held by each other. Our product was the dream of connection.”

How do you explain to people why you come to church? You don’t talk about product or efficiency. Church isn’t about getting things done. Its worth and value aren’t measured quantitatively. We are here for and because of relationships, a more honest relationship with our truest self, a deeper relationship with God, meaningful relationships with each other. We’re here for the sake of community.

We’re here because life can be lonely, and many of us are hungrier than we care to admit for relationships that matter, people with whom we can be ourselves. We long to feel accepted.

We’re here because there is a God-shaped hole in each of our hearts.

And we’re here because this world can seem like a hopeless place. I was astonished last week at how little attention was paid to the two back-to-back mass shootings in California. Some tragedies seem to generate more horror and outrage than others, and we could debate those reasons, but maybe we’re just growing a little numb.

Despair is everywhere you look - open the headlines on any given day. Ukraine. Climate disaster. Violence.

We cannot live without hope. Even if we try to bury our heads in the sand, or our bodies into our couches, even if we try to distract ourselves by eating or drinking or spending, we still need hope.

We have come to realize that there are tangible ways we can bring hope into our world. We do it together.

The Broadway musical, "Rent," is best remembered for the song, "Seasons of Love." It begins like this -

Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes

Five hundred, twenty five thousand moments so dear

Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes

How do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets

In midnights, in cups of coffee

In inches, in miles

In laughter, in strife

How do you measure a year in the life of this church?

If this were a business, we'd talk about a record year in sales.

If this were a sports team, we'd talk about wins.

But this is a church, a community of hope, and this is some of what I'll remember.

Meeting the family from Afghanistan that we sponsored - and then hearing stories about our members' interactions with them. Children from here went to their

home, and within minutes were sprawled out on their floor playing games and puzzles - who cares about a language barrier? Teachers from our church brought craft supplies and helped prepare the children for school. Cups and cups of tea were poured, snacks and meals were shared. We waited together in long lines at the BMV, we learned about cultural differences, we helped make connections with employers, and we all began to become more empathetic about what it would be like to arrive in this country with nothing except the trauma of having to leave your homeland, knowing your loved ones are still in danger.

Thank you to everyone who was a part of this ministry - through your financial support, donated goods, volunteer hours, including the Thrift Shop and especially Jamie Wise.

Every Thursday, all year long, Dave Witzigreuter ordered a large pizza and waited in the church kitchen for volunteers to arrive from Road to Hope, a sober living facility in Elyria. The guys who live there are happy to make the outing, eager to use their skills and give back. Dave always has jobs lined up for them - whether it's re-tiling a bathroom or hauling our Christmas trees in and out of the attic. Along the way, he gets to know them. As they work together, he hears their stories. Sometimes he'll come into my office - "Kelly, that kid grew up in Avon Lake. He remembers being in this church for a football dinner one time." Relationships of hope.

I wasn't there, but I treasure the memory of what happened one night on the Senior High Mission Trip. A young man sent his parents a text message, from Maine back to Avon Lake. "I just want to thank you for taking me to church all of those years,

and for connecting me to church and youth group. These people and these experiences are so important in my life and I am so grateful.”

After what we experienced together the previous two plus years, it was joyful to be able to reconnect in person many times in 2022, to enjoy a campfire concert, and the Fall Fest complete with dunk tank, to have kids running around the church for a week of Vacation Bible School, and to welcome Bike and Build.

Our new men’s ministry group and the women’s ministry LIFT group created the space for new relationships to blossom and flourish. And the PrimeTimers group is back.

How do you measure a year? In cups of coffee shared at our new Courtyard Cafe, in cards and phone calls sent to those who are ill or grieving. Hundreds of hours were spent in this church in 2022 in AA meetings, people helping each other through the struggle of sobriety, one day at a time.

We do measure, carefully and closely, the phenomenal success of our Good Neighbor Thrift Shop. There seems to be no end to the amount of good they are able to do, the clothing and household items they’re able to give away, and the money we’re able to pass along to our mission partners. Huge thanks to our manager, Kristen LePrevost and all the staff, the team led by Scot McNutt, all the volunteers, all who shop and all who donate.

Our theme for 2023 is Legacy. Throughout the year, we’ll be talking about our spiritual legacy, encouraging each other to take a step back and assess our lives, considering any changes we might want to make. What kind of legacy are we leaving in our roles as family members and friends? What will our legacy be as parents, as

spouses? We're offering financial education classes so that we can create financial legacies to be proud of. We'll offer some very practical sessions on estate and funeral planning. In all of this, we'll remind ourselves that God doesn't expect us to be perfect, that grace and forgiveness are foundational for us.

I want to close with three related comments. The first is a word of gratitude, to everyone who made 2022 such a remarkable year. To the leaders of our church, to my colleagues on staff, to those of you who give of time, talent and treasure.

The second is this. The United Church of Christ statistical report for 2021 was just released this week, and it shows that the denomination lost 85 churches that year, continuing a steady decline, which is similar to the trajectory of other mainline denominations. We could talk for a long time about the reasons and the solutions, but for now, I'll simply say this. No institution's future is guaranteed. All of our institutions are fragile. This church exists as long as we continue to support it, because we believe that our community is better off because this church is here. Because we don't want to imagine what our lives would be like without the relationships formed here. Because this church helps connect us to God in ways that transform our lives.

At our Annual Meeting today, we will be voting upon a Statement of Welcome and Inclusion. Adopting this statement won't change any of our church's policies and procedures - it's a description of what we've already been doing. But it will make our identity and values clear to guests and those seeking a new church home. I'm so grateful for the ways we live this out, even imperfectly, and ask God to help us live fully into this statement - which I will read as the conclusion to this morning's sermon:

We, the Avon Lake United Church of Christ, strive to be people of extravagant welcome. We affirm that all people are created in the image of God, and we celebrate the diversity of God's creation.

As we seek to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and endeavor to live out our shared mission – Growing People to Serve God and Others – we respect and gladly receive persons of every race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, age, socioeconomic status, marital standing and family structure, and religious background.

We believe that our political differences can be a source of strength, as together we practice civil discourse.

We welcome those who are seekers, those who aren't sure what they believe, all who come in a spirit of openness and mutual respect.

We affirm that the Holy Spirit gathers us as a congregation in which all persons are invited to participate in the life, leadership, ministry, fellowship, worship, sacraments, responsibilities, blessings, concerns, and joys of our community of faith. We hope and pray that by establishing and embodying this covenant of inclusion, we might fully follow Christ's commandment to love God and neighbor and be a safe place where love abounds.