

“Conviction, Community, a Cat Named ‘Little Boots’, and Other Reasons Why Church Matters”

Proper 23C (October 13, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 20:1-5; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

“I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity,” writes UCC minister Lillian Daniel in her book *When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough*.¹ “I am tired,” she continues, “of nutty, pistol-packing pastors who want to burn the Koran. I am tired of televangelists who claim that natural disasters are the will of God. I am tired of Christians who respond to the pain of disease with a lecture about behavior. I am tired of preachers who promise prosperity.” “I am tired of celebrities who criticize the church for being patriarchal and homophobic but do nothing to support the churches that are not. . . . I am tired of people who say they want a church like mine but cannot be bothered to attend one.” “Perhaps,” she admits, “I am really just tired of myself. In criticizing others in their faith, I hardly live up to the best of my own faith. . . . And this is why I can’t do this religion thing all by myself. This is why I need a community.”

To illustrate the importance of a religious community, Reverend Daniel tells a story about her cat named “Little Boots.”² “A container of Kentucky Fried Chicken appeared to be dancing in the middle of the dark street, with a life of its own,” she writes. “My husband and I stopped to investigate. Out of the chicken box crawled a terribly skinny kitten with long black fur and four bright white paws. She had been making that box dance, as she tried to lick out the last crumb for nourishment. Now she purred, leaning into me with her whole body. We adopted that little stray and named her Little Boots. Little boots thrived with cat food, a trip to the vet, and lots of love. But she remained very small and displayed the silliest behavior. She would sneak up on our other cats, as if to attack them, but she would be right in front of them, in plain sight. By the time she pounced, the cats had moved away. She couldn’t figure out how they knew she was coming. It was only when we found her walking on a second-story porch rail, precariously sticking her paw out into the air to feel for her next step, that we realized the obvious. Little Boots was blind. From then on, that cat became my hero. Nothing stopped her. When she ran into a wall, she turned back and ran the other way. When she walked into a piece of furniture, she remembered where it was the next time. She didn’t sit still. Her little white paws were always out in the air in front of her, testing, to find her next foothold. She was tiny and the world was dangerous. But Little Boots seemed to walk by faith, not sight. She was the perfect companion to take to divinity school. We moved that little cat to four different apartments in New Haven, and each time she had to relearn the lay of the land. . . . I found myself having to adjust when, in my last year at Yale Divinity School, pregnant with my first child, we learned that Little Boots had a critical medical condition. As a grad student living on loans, saving for a new baby, we had no money for her expensive treatments Seven months pregnant, I became so despondent that I couldn’t eat. . . . Eight months pregnant, hormones swirling my moods like a bad cocktail, I lost all energy except for the energy to examine my rotten life and to ask the hard

¹ Lillian Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 83-84.

² Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough*, 200-204.

questio[n]. How would I take care of a baby when I couldn't even provide for my cat? ... Sunk into melancholy for days, I would watch Little Boots sleep on my pregnant belly, rising and falling with my breath. The cat was unaware of her condition, but was clearly slipping away into more and more hours of sleep. ... It was all I could do to get myself to class [At a chapel service, I sat next to a woman named Marie.] 'We've taken up a collection,' Marie said as she pushed a thick envelope of money into my hand after chapel services It was like the envelope drug dealers share on television, slipped to me furtively, and when I opened it, I could immediately see that it contained hundreds of dollars. 'It's for Little Boots,' she whispered. 'Now you can take her to the vet.' ... We went to the vet with the envelope full of anonymous donations. It turns out the treatments did not work. ... Little Boots slipped away to her next destination serenely in my husband's arms But as sad as we were, were left serene as well. ... We had done what we could, not because of our own power but because of a community that decided to pitch in, and the [spirit of God] that runs through it. ... When I think of all the creatures I have loved and lost," concludes Daniel, "I am struck by one thing. I thought I was taking care of them, but really they were taking care of me. And I think this is exactly what God had in mind. We're here to look out for one another."

Each of today's scripture readings talks about how deeply meaningful religious community can be. Today's Psalm, like so many other Psalms, is a liturgical call and response. Liturgy comes from a Greek word that means something like "work of the people." The call and response of a liturgical Psalm is the "work" of a congregation. We might imagine a liturgist up front in an ancient community of faith reading or singing the Psalm's first line: "The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!" And the congregation responds by reading or singing the second line: "The name of the God of Jacob protect you!" And on it goes, line by line, call and response, like our weekly Call to Worship. But Psalm 20 is *actually* a congregational prayer. Our English translation of the Psalm makes it seem like verse 1 is declarative and the verses that come after are words of blessing that begin with "may": *May God send you help...May God remember all your offerings...May God grant you your heart's desire...May God fulfill all our petitions.* But the Hebrew text doesn't make this distinction between the first verse and the verses that follow. Each of the Psalm's first five verses could begin with the word "May." *May the Lord answer you when times are tough...May God help you...May God remember you...May God grant your heart's desire...May God answer your prayers.* This Psalm is meant for a congregation at prayer, praying for each other as a community, like our weekly time of sharing joys, concerns, and prayers together.

On Friday, Reverend Vicki Kemper wrote a UCC *Daily Devotional* about "The Power of Being Prayed For." "Thoughts and prayers get a bad rap these days," she writes, "but I am here to testify to the power of being prayed for. Recently I was preparing to take on an important and intimidating task. I reached out to some folks, asking them to pray for me A few people responded with offers of encouragement and prayers, which meant a lot to me. One person invited me to text her as I was walking into the 'lion's den.' Once she heard from me, she said, she would stop whatever she was doing to pray. I texted her, and let me tell you: Knowing someone was praying for me as I entered that challenging situation empowered me. I felt not only the power of prayer, but also the power of connection and the power of presence. Maybe your life is stress-free," writes Kemper, "but many of us live in a constant state of worry. Some of us don't know if we can make it through another day. Some of us don't know how we're going to pay this month's bills. More than a few of us feel

disconnected and disempowered. And we all have our rough days. What if, as you approached your difficult task or exciting moment, you reached out to someone and asked for prayer? What if, when you knew of someone facing a challenge, you offered to pray for them in the moment? Who knows how you (and they) might be changed? Who is to say what might come of that intimate connection through prayer? Wouldn't it be wonderful to find out?" We might think of today's Psalm as an ancient way of discovering how meaningful it is to be prayed for by a congregation.

Yes, being part of a congregation means sharing joys and concerns, and praying for each other. But being part of a church community is also good for our health. In an article back in September titled "Are We Living in a Post-Happiness World," Laura Holson asks why happiness feels so elusive for many of us.³ "Haven't we learned anything since 2014," she asks, "when Marie Kondo taught us that cleaning our closets was a path to bliss?" "According to the World Happiness Report," she writes, "which ranks 156 countries based [people's] perception and well-being, happiness in the United States is declining. Americans said they were less content in 2018 than a year earlier, ranking No. 19 behind Australia and Canada." Americans are "exhausted," she says, because of "the 24-hour news cycle, ... the onslaught of natural disasters, social upheaval, and political strife" And "with the rise [of] ... social media ... ," she says, "virtual communities are replacing real-world gatherings," changing the way we relate to each other. What's interesting about Holson's article is that she points to religious communities as islands of happiness in our society, because in church, she says, people gather in the real world and sing together, and as a community, experience awe and joy, sharing in each other's sufferings and blessings. Yes, being part of a faith community can be good for our health - can bring us joy - even if some of our fellow congregants drive us nuts sometimes.

In a piece in *The Atlantic* back in 2017,⁴ Peter Beinart made a similar point. Based on several studies, Beinart notes that being part of a religious community actually makes people *more* tolerant, and this holds whether people attend conservative or progressive churches. The *least* tolerant people, he writes, even those who claim to be "evangelical," are those who rarely attend religious services. "The most committed members of a church," writes Beinart, "are more likely than those who are casually involved to let its message of universal love erode their prejudices." These findings also hold in places like Sweden, where far-right voters were *least* likely to attend religious services or be part of other community organizations. There's something about sharing in the life of a committed community that's good for our health and makes us better human beings. Being part of a community teaches us - as in that "Little Boots" story - to look out for each other and not just ourselves. And isn't community what the prophet was talking about in today's reading from Jeremiah? Seek the welfare - the *shalom*, in Hebrew, the peace and well-being - of the community in which you live, says Jeremiah. Settle down there, have babies, volunteer in the community, make a happy life for yourself there; for, says Jeremiah, "in the community's *shalom* you will find your *shalom*." Attending church, being involved in church, helping the church make decisions, volunteering your time, giving money, praying for each other, eating and singing together - being part of a community - this is all practice for living better during the week. Today's New Testament reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians makes this exact point: church is practice for living better during the week. "Don't seek revenge against

³ The following is a summary of the collected research Holson cites in her piece:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/28/sunday-review/joy-happiness-life.html>

⁴ <https://amp.theatlantic.com/amp/article/517785/>

each other,” writes Paul, but instead, “always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” Be joyful, pray, be thankful, he writes. Practice these things in the church community, and then live them each day of the week.

...Let me close this morning with another story told by UCC minister Lillian Daniel.⁵ It’s a story about a Sexton named Pete, and the blessing of church community. “Pete was the Sexton at the first church I served, in charge of maintaining the physical plant of the church,” writes Daniel. ... “With his ever-present dark jeans and T-shirts, salt-and-pepper beard, and rock-star-skinny build, people were always telling Pete that he looked like Eric Clapton. ... The beauty of working with Pete,” she continues, “was that he might come over to my parsonage to fix a leaky pipe, but he’d end up being convinced to have just one cup of coffee, and then another, and then another. Soon you’d discover that three hours had gone by. While the sink was not yet fixed, you sure had learned a lot about Masonic conspiracy theories, the hazards of a bad acid trip, or why life in the Connecticut suburbs had never been for Pete. ... Scarred by church long ago, Pete had been drawn into an intellectual dance in which he read much about all religions but could not bear to rest in one. [And yet], he had found a job that [constantly] pulled him into the inner workings of a community of faith While he never sat in those pews at the appointed hour, he was participating in the church in every other way. When lung cancer caught up with him, when a cup of coffee became too heavy to hold, when bad cells had wrapped themselves around the last safe breathing space in his thinning body, his wife called me to a Catholic hospital, where I saw Pete be still for the first time in my life. To watch his wiry, fidgety body at rest, moving only with the up and down of the respirator, ... to watch the tears [of his wife] as she held onto him in this small moment, I was suddenly the church [for Pete],” says Daniel, “present at the moment when [he] would die, and I would witness my very first experience of life leaving one body and going somewhere else. I think we do this for one another [more than we think],” says Daniel “We interact with those who will not step foot in the institutions we love. ... And then in ... moments of utter crisis, we find ourselves called into the eye of the tornado. And suddenly we realize that we have become, for them, the church. And we are called to play a role greater than our role as friend, family member, or colleague. ... ‘Do you believe in heaven,’ ... Pete had asked me many times over coffee, just checking to make sure I still thought it was true. ... [It was a question that asked for my testimony, and for] the testimony of the church that has stood in the midst of utter sadness and made claims that only the mad would make. ... Testimony is calling out that [we] have seen light in the midst of darkness,” she writes. “Testimony is telling the story about how [we] met God, even when [we] have forgotten it. Testimony is retelling the story of a community over time ... and how God [has been present]. And when [we’re invited] into the most intimate and sad moments, we become the church ... [- a church that says,] ‘yes, in the midst of this tragedy, I believe there is more than all of this.’”

It’s to speak and to live as a community of people who hope. Amen.

⁵ Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough*, 18-24.