

Stronger Together

Readings: 'Picnic to the Earth' by Shuntaro Tanikawa
'How the Trees on Summer Nights Turn into a Dark River' by Barbara Crooker

People's Church is the home of powerful stories, stories of hope, stories of love, stories of change. Stories that can only happen because we are stronger together. This church changes lives within and beyond these walls. Many of you know this because it's happened to you. These are some of the powerful stories that I know.

We are stronger together when we educate our children. This church has offered Our Whole Lives Comprehensive Sexuality Education to children and young adults this church year. Trained teams of volunteer facilitators are giving our younger generations age-appropriate information about their bodies and their identities and helping them clarify their values so they can make decisions that promote health and wholeness. We are stronger together. And our efforts are not for our children and young adults alone.

Lilian Gates is one of our middle schoolers who has been in the Our Whole Lives class this year. When she recently had sex ed in school, her teacher, as required by Michigan law, stressed abstinence. Her teacher said, "abstinence is the only way to prevent sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy." Lilian, because of what she has learned here, knew that was not the whole story. She spoke up, "Actually," she said, "that isn't true. You can use condoms to prevent STIs and pregnancy and there are lots of birth control options to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. And even if you get pregnant, there are things that can be done to keep from having a baby." "I can't discuss that," was the teacher's legally-mandated response. But, in that moment, Lilian's classmates learned from her how to care for their bodies based on medical fact, not fear, not religious ideology. We are equipping our young people to go out into the world to spread good news, the good news of science, the good news of comprehensive sexuality education.

We are people of love and people of hope. We are helping generations in our community live ethical lives. We are helping young people weed through the misinformation and outright lies about sexuality that they are required to hear in school. Lilian's classmates, children who have never set foot in this church, are better educated because of what we do here. We are powerful. We are stronger together. Your generosity makes this possible.

We are stronger together when we come together in times of pain and heartbreak. As we struggle to make sense of the mass shooting that happened in our community last month, we

have leaned into our communities of support and found strength. As many of you know, after the shooting, some local religious leaders organized a vigil. Quite a few of you attended. Because I serve here, because People's Church is a beacon of love and hope in our community, I was invited to be among the half-dozen speakers. We all needed to hear that fear will not win. I said that that we are all wrapped in love, that we must boldly go out to love the hell out of this world. My words resonated. People I had never met thanked me for what I said. Some of my words were later shared across Facebook and a sentence or two made the National Public Radio broadcast the following morning. It was a surreal experience in the midst of my grief.

I know and I want you to know that the invitation I received to speak was not about me. It was about all of you. I became your minister last August. I haven't been here long enough to forge the relationships or earn the reputation that would have earned that invitation. No, when the Presbyterian pastor called and invited me to speak, it was because of all of you. I was invited because of the reputation you have created and the legacy we have all inherited. I was invited because People's Church is a beacon of love and hope in Kalamazoo. Of course, your minister should speak to a grieving community. You are influential. You are known for love and justice. We—here at People's Church and beyond—support one another in hard times. Together, we can endure.

We are also stronger together when the hard times comes in ways that don't make the national news. When members of our community face loss and illness, we support one another. We bring food. We provide rides. Our presence reminds them they are not alone. They are wrapped in love. Grief and loss shared is easier to bear. Together, we can endure. We are stronger together.

We are stronger together in worship, Sundays services, our weekly gathering. We don't always agree on what to call what happens here at 10:45am on Sundays, but we agree that, at its best, it is powerful. It is one of the ways we are stronger together. It is only through the participation of all of you and the collaboration of dozens of people – the choir, the Sunday services committee, the AV committee, our musicians, the ushers, the staff of the church, and me—that we are able to gather on Sundays for about an hour to reconnect with one another and what matters most, to be renewed, and to be transformed into the people we are called to be. Your generosity makes this possible.

There is an unfolding story in our community about how worship has transformed us and will transform the lives of a refugee family. Last fall, when the Syrian Refugee Crisis was dominating the headlines, I preached on my experience in Syria, about the hospitality I received when I travelled there 15 years ago. I was expecting to tell the story, to reflect on hospitality, and leave it there. But some of you were called to action. Some of you believed the church could be a co-

sponsor of a refugee family. Some of you contacted the refugee resettlement agencies in West Michigan and asked how we could get involved. Some of you reached out to other faith groups and other community members in Kalamazoo, knowing that nothing worth doing can be accomplished alone. We would be better together, stronger together. It took months, but now we've met with Bethany Christian Services and will likely become a co-sponsor of a refugee family as Bethany starts resettling refugee families in Kalamazoo in the coming months. We are People of love and people of hope – and we are spreading that hope and love to people fleeing war and disaster, people who desperately need welcome, love, and hope.... and we bring love and hope not just to refugee families, but to students at Lincoln School, to our community through ISAAC congregation-based community organizing, and through so many other channels. We are stronger together. Your generosity makes this possible.

Those are some of the powerful stories about how we here at People's Church are stronger together. And there are so many more. How have you known this church to be stronger together?

I also have some powerful numbers about how we are stronger together. Recently, Chris, our church administrator, did some rough calculations of all the volunteering that happens here at People's Church– and in our service to the community. There are 561 volunteer tasks that happen every year. This includes serving on committees, volunteering at the bazaar, teaching religious education, making the coffee, mowing the lawn, and so many other things. 561 volunteer tasks. People's Church has 245 members. That means many of you are doubling or tripling up. About 90 of you serve in three or more ways around here. About 150 of you are giving your time to serve the church and its ministries every single month. Thank you. I hope you feel very proud of yourselves – and I hope you can see and sense and know that we are stronger together.

You all are generous with your time – and you are generous with your money. Mark Mitchell, stewardship committee chair, who you'll be hearing from in a few minutes, shared more interesting numbers. From July 2009 to June of last year, members and friends gave \$2.275 million dollars to this church. That is amazing! Thank you. Over that six-year period, members and friends gave nearly 2 and a half million dollars to our yearly operating budget and to the capital campaign for the building expansion. Thank you. We are truly stronger together.

Because this is the stewardship sermon, you all know what's coming next. I'm going to encourage you to keep the good things going – keep being generous with your time and

treasure, so we might make even more love and hope manifest here in our church—and beyond. People's Church has accomplished so much – and I know there is a bright future in store. We can continue to be a place of support, transformation, and inspiration. We can continue to be a beacon of love and hope for our community. We have big dreams. We can reach them if we continue to be generous.

Those of you who attended the budget hearing last week know that one of our big dreams is to grow the music program. The music here is great—as we have seen this morning—and it can be even better. We are hoping over the next several years to grow our very part-time music staff into a half-time music director. We dream of having music better coordinated with other parts of our worship services, of having more music in the children's religious education program, of becoming an even stronger singing church. We can be stronger together. Your generosity will make that possible.

Another dream for the future is to grow our commitment to comprehensive sexuality education in our community. We are planning for an adult Our Whole Lives class next fall. This will be for everyone age 18 and above. Class participants will explore sexuality, identity, and ethical decision making. I hope you can attend. This class will not be only for People's People. Since Our Whole Lives is a program developed by both the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ, we're reaching out to the Unitarian Universalist church in Portage and United Church of Christ congregations in Portage and Kalamazoo to invite their members of to take the class with us. The hope—a hope shared with some of the clergy of those churches—is that taking Our Whole Lives themselves will get these adults excited to offer it to the children and youth in their congregations. In the coming years, it might not be just our courageous children speaking out against the misinformation and lies their teachers are required to say during sex ed in schools. We can help create a whole generation of courageous, outspoken liberal religious children and youth countering misinformation promoting sexual health and wholeness in our schools, among their friend groups, and in our wider community. We can be stronger together. Your generosity will make this possible.

Your generosity makes everything that happens here possible. In a few minutes, when this service ends, you will be given pledge cards and be asked to make your commitment to supporting the church for the 2016-2017 fiscal year that begins in July. Please give generously. We trust you to know what is generous for you – and there are such a wide range of financial circumstances in our congregation that I cannot suggest a one-size-fits-all amount. A few have the means and commitment to give \$2,000 per month. Others can give \$200 per month. Others among us can give \$20 per month and that is sacrificial giving. That is forgoing some of life's pleasures to save money to give to the church. We ask that you give generously—and we gratefully accept what you are able to give. If any level of financial commitment is not possible for you, we do have financial waivers that you can sign, no questions asked.

I call you to be generous for many reasons. There are the self-serving reasons – you all pay my salary. I have only been here since August and I love it here. This church and the wider community are quickly becoming home for me and my family. My husband shares with me all the time that he hopes to live in Kalamazoo for the rest of his life. Your continued giving allows me to do the work I love for a church I love in a city that I love. Thank you.

There are deeper reasons, though, less self-serving reasons. As the spiritual leader of this congregation, I call on you to be generous today because it is good for your soul. Generosity is an act of remembering that we are all connected. We are stronger together. Whatever wealth we possess, whether it vast or meagre, we did not gain in isolation. We are indebted to those who educated us, to those who built the institutions that have employed us, to those who allow us to live in relative safety and security – if we are privileged to live in safety and security. So many of us benefit from others' previous actions—and so, for our spiritual integrity, for the sake of our souls—we must give away some of what we have been given to create an even better world for those who will come next.

We are generous because we cannot accomplish the works of love alone. We are generous because we know that nothing worth doing can be done alone. We are all connected. We are stronger together. People's Church exists as it does—as a beacon of love and hope in our community—because people have given their time and talent and treasure to support it for over 150 years. Their generosity has made today possible. Previous generations have now passed us the baton and it is our task to maintain and grow this vision, to be people of love and people of hope for today, to speak to present circumstances, prepare for what may come, and provide an even stronger, more powerful, more transforming church to those who are not yet here. Your generosity makes this possible.

May we give generously of our time, our talent, and our treasure.

May we continue to be a place of transformation, inspiration, and support.

May we be a beacon of love and hope for our community.

May we know in our hearts and show in our actions that we are stronger together.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.