

I love to tell the story of unseen things above - of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story because I know tis true. It satisfies my longing as nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

The words are by Arabella Katherine Hankey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She was active Anglican who promoted the abolition of slavery and was involved in improving the lives of the working classes. She taught bible study for shop girls in London, visited the sick in the hospital, and wrote to support mission causes. (from hymnology.org) She was and is part of the ekklessia (pronounced ak kla si a ), the Greek word translated for church in today's readings in Ephesians. It comes from combination of words in Greek and it means, "to be set apart and to God."

Let me share with us some love stories today - stories with conflicts, like storms in the sea let's say. All the stories have agents, people acting on the gift of their faith, and all the stories are about love. All the stories are about ekklessia, the church, organic and living, the Christ in me and you, the house of God's Spirit, and how God lives and moves in us, temples of God's Spirit.

My first story is about a shepherding lawyer. One upon a time, I was called to testify in front of a judge on behalf of a woman seeking asylum. I did not fully understand the extent of what just happened in the courtroom and the judgment he gave. The shepherding lawyer said that this particular judge rarely granted asylum and what we received was nothing short of a miracle, unprecedented. He shared that this was a monumental moment for us and for all his future clients and with this judge. He must have sensed that I was not getting the scope of what just happened. We had been walking the way back to his office across the streets from that famously large court building in NYC, and he stopped at one cross section and looked me in the eye to offer me his reflection. I'm grateful he took the time to pause and gift me his compassion and or the word used in today's Gospel lesson in Mark for Jesus' compassion, the Greek word for womb, like a parent's womb. I'm sure this lawyer had been just as tired as Jesus being an immigrations lawyer working with clients for sometimes decades. He was no doubt wanting a quiet place after the trial, and he still offered me this space and time, this womb, and in and through it, I think I was able to better understand how God calls us to participate as human agents with more trust even as we see not how God's love for God's people unfolds. In many ways, he was an agent that born me into a deeper understanding of what it is that we do as the body of Christ, the church. The church, ekklessia, not just for one person, one family, but inclusive of all God's people. What he shared remains with me in my ministries because it helped me to fully understand the power of our human agency, our gift of faith in action and our responsibility for one another that can accomplish far more than we can ever imagine. It's like the words from the parable of the mustard seed; we do not see how the seed sprouts and grows, and yet it does. Often, we take for granted the gift of faith like praying and accompanying someone to court for example. I did not see how in the story of God's love that God's love is infinite. The lawyer shared with me a story shared, from both his Jewish heritage as well as my Christian heritage, of the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. He shepherded me with words that pretty much said to me that doing my responsibility changed not only the person I accompanied into court that day, but the lives of her two sons who he could now apply to come join her in the states. She had been separated for over 10 years. He said that this moment forever

changes the status of not only his client and a her being a member of the church I was pastoring, but now forever the inclusion of her children, her grandchildren and all their descendants into rights as citizens here now and of the realm that both he/I understand to be God's dream for us. I had thought I was just helping my member and was happy with and for her and her family. I thought I just did what it is that I do, pray and be present, accompany when asked and or invited. I'm reminded now of the amazing grace that we the church is called to be the accompaniment, the body of God's Spirit. We are home, temple, dwelling, ekklessia inclusive of generations, infinite in God's realm. The following year, the church and I was blessed, as the pastor, to baptize our newest member, her son into our church, ekklessia, home of God's Spirit. Later her other son came to join her /us and in the midst of the pandemic; I was able to witness, through ZOOM from a different time and space, her other son being baptized and the waters being poured over him by the hands of that first son because of the pandemic and our care around touching water together made that possible. It's amazing God's redeeming grace.

"I love to tell the story. Tis pleasant to repeat what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet. I love to tell the story. For some have never heard the message of salvation from God's own holy word."

In our readings in Ephesians 2:11-22, we have the ekklessia, the house, the temple, the living and organic church of God's Spirit; it is born through the acts of faith, through the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together being reconciled to God in Christ's love and brought into one community. The lines of division have been removed by God through Christ's love. Now, both are part of God's household and are built into a temple for God's Spirit.

We also have the story today in Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 of Jesus calling the disciples to rest after their return from mission. But as they try to withdraw to a quiet place, people continue to crowd them in, and we are told Jesus took compassion. Jesus took "womb" on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and wherever people were brought to Jesus, they were healed - the healing power of Jesus' compassion, of Jesus being womb, home, temple, the ekklessia for the sick.

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What these stories have in common are how often throughout the life of the people of God; we more often than not, like to box God in, into our own constructions, homes, to domesticate God. We cannot build a house for God, sanctify our own agendas and try to get God to occupy our spaces and make God our own. Rather, it is God who builds house for us and inclusive for all people. God's house seeks to remove all the walls that divides us. And into that house of inclusion, we are called with our human agency to be the temples, the wombs of God's compassion, justice and peace. We are called to be good shepherds under our true Good Shepherd. Jesus showed us what love in service lives, dies, and rises again looks like. Being agents of such a household, ekklesia, church, the body of Christ may mean we create places at tables for inclusion so that we practice the kind of love that says nothing about "us" without "us." In reality, the reconciled community of Jews and Gentiles in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, as depicted in the letter to the Ephesians, is a work in process community. The church, ekklessia, is a living

body, organic community. It is not unchanged by this pandemic. It is impossible to return to the ways things use to be. Nevertheless, Christ is present and we have peace. God's Spirit will house us to both faith and courage to continue to move towards a more just, inclusive and peaceful reality. The hope of an inclusive community is the confession and assurance that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of Christ. Christ is our peace. Recall the story of Jesus and disciples in the storm crossing the sea just a few Sundays back. It is the presence of Jesus that is our peace. Christ is our peace.

So, when churches, and this includes the current conflictual state of our UMC, fail to see God's Spirit within each person, fail at building a house and being a temple in which God's Spirit lives and moves, how do we keep on with hope? Well, I'm reminded this week of the telling of God's love in telling not a very old, old stor, but of the more recent one in our Western Jurisdiction, as we remember the consecration of Rev. Karen Oliveto as the first openly gay bishop in the UMC. As we remember God's people as God's agents opening the doors, we can have hope.

This week also marked the one year anniversary of John Lewis's rise in glory. He is remembered for living his life "making good trouble" and inspiring us that conflicts is not to be avoided, but rather, where we will encounter Christ, and it is Christ presence that offers us peace towards reconciliation. He was with MLK Jr. at the March in Washington and he heard the words, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." We all know it's long, and though it bends towards justice, towards reconciliations, towards that ekklessia, the dwelling of God's Spirit with all in peace, the ideal of lambs and lions laying together, of shalom, we know that if we really trust in it, we better get to it as active agents of that realm and not just expect it to happen while we are passively asleep. We are called out and to be creators of ekklessia, house of God's Spirit, and to get to it here and now. Be love stories. It is relationships of love becoming more inclusive that builds the house of God. And when we do, let us not be naïve; there will be conflicts because many would rather it never comes and or be delayed. Ekklessia, meaning set apart from the world and to God, means also that in and of itself it will be disruptive.

Let me call us to action to something with an easy entry door to becoming more inclusive church in the area of becoming good neighbors. I invite you to sign up for the "Connecting Neighbors" workshop training presented by UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief). You can read more on it in our newsletter. I thank John for responding to the informational meeting on this and leading us into the opportunity towards taking the first module of 3 modules of trainings. Each module helps us move into larger circles of service, of shepherding. From our family to congregation to community and further out in times of disasters, it calls us into disaster relief ministries. I hope you will look at this opportunity as another possibility of our church being God's ekklessia - home of God's Spirit.

And I invite us to reflect on what is our story of Jesus and his love? I love to hear it. Love stories change us. It changes the other. It changes God. Our relationship with God and one another is a love relationship so if love doesn't also change God, us and neighbors and strangers and enemies, what kind of love is that? We, as church, are saying pretty much that we are lovers of God. And when churches get a bad name, it's because we are not living like lovers. Nothing changes us, God and our world like Jesus and his love. In truth, we are told God loved us/our enemies/the creation/the "other" and "otherness" of ourselves to the fullness and glory of

Godself. God promised to always be “all in” with the cosmos. That is both the old, old story as well as the new story we sing always.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it, like the rest. And when in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song, twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.

I love to tell the story, twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old, story of Jesus and his love. Go live and tell the story of Jesus and his love. May it be so. Amen.