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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00]

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation.

[00:00:05] Rev. Ken Beldon

Our story today begins in a hill in Bexley, Ohio. And I only know where Bexley, Ohio, is because one of my friends from divinity school I graduated with 25 years ago was for a time dean of the small Episcopal seminary, Bexley Seminary in Bexley, Ohio. It's just outside Columbus then that I know I about Becky, except the story I want to tell you.

[00:00:27]

Two friends, one of them the author. "And You Know, You Should be Glad: a True Story of Lifelong Friendship."

[00:00:36]

Two men in their 60s climbing a hill that they had climbed first when they were five years old together. A hill. That they played on a hill that they associated with someone named Audie Murphy, who a few.

[00:00:57]

Yeah, and a few people. 9:30 got it too.

[00:00:59]

I only know about Audie Murphy because my dad was born in 1932 and he told me a little something about Audie Murphy. The actor soldier fought the Nazis in World War 2. Audie Murphy, who Bob and his friend Jack climbing this hill first when they were five years old, decades ago, re-enacting this story of their hero or one of their heroes. Decades later, Bob and Jack climbing this hill, which as children looked so huge and it took all their effort to be able to walk up it and get to the summit, and now they looked at it and they thought, this hill is not very big at all. That's how our perspective changes over time. And yet here they were decades later, climbing the same hill together, bonded together through decades of friendship.

[00:01:54]

They rejoin this story from their younger years. And it opens this book. Today, I want to talk about how stories function in our friendships and in fact are the glue that hold our friendships together, bind us to each other.

[00:02:11]

See, today I'm starting this new message series myself and Reverend Lee and worship leaders will be offering to you over the next couple months.

[00:02:19]

And it is simply titled Being a Friend. And yes, the Golden Girls themes, I'm sure, will run amuck here over the next couple of months.

[00:02:29]

As they should.

[00:02:32]

Being a friend for some of us, it is not, as we say in the description of this message series, as simple as it was back in kindergarten, and maybe for some of you it wasn't simple at all back in kindergarten.

[00:02:44]

For me, I kind of remember it this way. Hey, you want to play? Yes. Let's play cool. We're friends. It was, at least for me, easier back then than it is now. And so often when you watch little kids play right, what they're doing is they're either telling stories or creating stories or re-enacting stories, bringing stories to life through who they are and in their play together. And the truth is, many of us as adults kind of forget this.

[00:03:13]

Kind of forget to play sometimes, also forget how meaningful our stories are and how they bind us, bond us to each other.

[00:03:23]

So this message series about encouraging, sustaining, creating, growing our friendships through this life, I think is particularly important at kind of where we are right now as a culture.

[00:03:36]

Some of you I know study this. Some of you might have just seen it, your Facebook feed. If you're on social media. But there's a number of metrics that have come out in the last few years that kind of reveal that America is more lonely society and there's all kinds of real negative consequences associated with that.

[00:03:54]

And there's one particular metric that shows up over and over again as they measure the fact that loneliness is on the rise because something else is decreasing.

[00:04:06]

When I could say if, but when?

[00:04:10]

The bottom falls out from underneath your life. Do you have someone you can turn to? That's the way the question is asked in these polls and fewer and fewer people over the last couple decades are answering yes. I think the average is just like one plus maybe. A friend we can really turn to when the trap door opens up underneath us and the bottom drops out of our lives. Some people like to refer to it as an epidemic of loneliness. I don't know if that's scientifically quite accurate. But we do appear and can measure.

[00:04:50]

Many of us are lonelier. Then other people have been in the past.

[00:04:58]

Because we are a spiritual community, I want to talk to you today about one of my favorite stories of loneliness, finding its way into deeper connection.

[00:05:09]

It's associated with this teacher who was a beloved teacher of mine. If you show that next slide. So you know who this is. Many of you may not know Sharon Salzberg.

[00:05:23]

She is a Buddhist teacher. She's actually one of the three co-founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. And I have studied with a number of people who studied with her. And I've been deeply encouraged him along my own spiritual path by her teachings.

[00:05:41]

Sharon Salzberg grew up in a family that can charitably be described as dysfunctional.

[00:05:50]

It was a pain. It was a family in which trauma marked every aspect of her young life. See, Sharon's father lived for years with undiagnosed and untreated substance use disorders and mental health disorder. And so what marked Sharon's young life all the way until she went to college was a profound sense of loneliness, was a profound sense of not fitting in. Was a profound sense of not belonging, largely because she felt that there was something terribly wrong with her. She had internalized the trauma with which she grew up and believed that there was no place for her and that in fact she was destined to repeat what her growing up years had been like.

[00:06:42]

Until Sharon went to India to study abroad during college. And she encountered for the first time the story of the Buddha.

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Which on the face of it, didn't have much in common with hers. She was not a rich young prince leaving everything behind in order to pursue spiritual enlightenment. She was just kind of a lost late years teenager trying to find something and some place to connect to. But for the first time when she heard the Buddha story, see for her, it was only that there was something so wrong with her that marked her as different. When she first heard the Buddha story, she said, you know what, maybe my trauma, my pain, my suffering, my sense of dis ease in this life might be the very things that allow me to grow.

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Allow me to cultivate wisdom and compassion and love. She found herself in that story. Now, if you know anything about Sharon Salzberg, she is most associated with the Buddhist practice of loving kindness of "Metta." That's what this tattoo means. Loving kindness. This other one over here is "Chesed," it's the Jewish tradition which I grew up also, meaning loving kindness, kind of what grew me up and also where I most find my own heart spiritually these days.

[00:08:12]

Now, Metta Loving Kindness is one of the called the four unmeasurable qualities a limitless quality. But there's actually a better translation for Metta than lovingkindness. Unconditional friendliness.

[00:08:31]

Such a beautiful and warm way to describe loving kindness, unconditional friendliness. And that's what Sharon started to find in her life. Someone who felt she was inadequate and worthless and was born to be rejected. Found instead in this story of the Buddha, an echo of her own life.

[00:08:55]

This has happened for me, and I imagine it's happened for some of you as well, too, in a particular way. For me in my mid-thirties, recognizing that the life that I was living was no longer sustainable. I found my way into my first recovery room. I'm not talking the E.R., I'm talking Recovery Fellowship.

[00:09:17]

I mean, now long term recovery from a substance use disorder. And my God, was I terrified because I walked in with all of that. I don't belong.

[00:09:29]

And yet nowhere else to go.

[00:09:32]

I remember the second meeting I went to when, my God, I felt like I had to like bolt my feet on the floor to the floor to keep myself in that room, to keep me from running out at the end of that meeting, because I don't want to be there and I don't want to be anywhere else. I did start talking to someone and they said words that stick with me to this day. They said we take everyone from Yale to jail here.

[00:09:54]

And I said, I had one part of that. And someone over my shoulder piped up and said, I have the other part of that. And I said, okay, this I might be able to work with.

[00:10:03]

Was the recovery fellowships that have introduced me to this power of story.

[00:10:10]

That someone else can speak the story, not in sameness. Not that all the facts are exactly identical, but there's a core there that is so powerful that when they speak their story, you can find yourself in it. And then as you begin to find the words to speak your story, someone else can let you know that they find themselves in it. And that's one of the beautiful things that I find over and over again in the recovery movement is for so many of us who felt as if we were profoundly inadequate and unworthy of belonging, we have found friendships and belonging through sharing stories with each other. It's one of the things I take into my practice of being a UU minister, which is kind of an interesting thing. Do you know that there's like three times as many people who call themselves Unitarian Universalist that actually belong to our congregations? It's like maybe two hundred thousand people who are, you know, Unitarian Universalists on the books, so-called and yet routinely in public opinion polls, six hundred seven hundred thousand, I've even seen 750000 people count themselves as Unitarian Universalist.

[00:11:20]

You know, there's a lot of ways that different you interpret this one is that maybe we are less popular than our ideas are. I know what quite that says about us. But here's one thing that I have identified.

[00:11:31]

Sometimes we lead with that Unitarian part, which is a wonderful part of our tradition. And that culture is most often associated with free thought and free thinking. And you're welcome here. And we're not going to throw a lot of dogma on you. And that's wonderful. But it tends to be a freedom just associate with our just associate with our reason and our thinking.

[00:11:52]

There's a whole other part of our tradition. It's the Universalist tradition which says essentially that love is the most powerful force of transformation in the world.

[00:12:05]

That's a story.

[00:12:07]

And by the way, when I meet people for the first time and I talk to them, you, minister, in addition to some of the other things that I do. And I suppose that I give that one sentence, we kind of believe that love is the most powerful transformative force in the universe. You know, the next thing that happens if they don't hear he's a minister. I want to stop talking to him.

[00:12:28]

But sometimes does happen, by the way, which I totally get and accept for most often what happens.

[00:12:35]

They start telling me their stories. Of the people they know or themselves for whom love has transformed their lives. That's finding ourselves in a larger story than ourselves. Not based on sameness or being identical.

[00:12:53]

But based upon belonging. Our friendships are held together. But the stories that we tell, share and create with one another. I mean, you know, kids know this. Again, we as adults forget it. You know what the kids say. Tell me a story.

[00:13:17]

Sometimes it's a story, a book, and sometimes it's a story that you just create up, you know, on in the moment out of nonsense out of thin air. I remember one that I told my nieces years ago that ended up with the title "Squidlatc and the Moo-Moosoukases" is I cannot remember exactly what Squidlatc and the Moo-Moosoukases are but I remember. They were thrilled by it. This is what happens when we allow ourselves that power to create and bond with each other. When you scratch the surface of our friendships, this is what we find there so often. The next image I want to show you is really stay with me over the last few months. And I swear it is true. I swear it is actually real. It's from The Guardian and this is a reputable journalistic site. Earth sandwich, two men, two slices of bread and twelve thousand seven hundred twenty four kilometers of filling. A student in New Zealand decided that what he wanted to do was create a literal earth sandwich with one slice of bread. At this longitude and latitude and another slice of bread at the exact opposite place on the globe and looked for months, months and months to find a partner to place the other slice of bread and create that earth sandwich. And he finally found it in Spain.

[00:14:42]

Human beings are wonderfully creative creature sometimes, aren't we?

[00:14:46]

Now, the two of these people, as I understand it, are not actually friends. Not that they're enemies. They just didn't know each other. But when I think about the bonding that stories create between me and my friends, sometimes when we are at vast distances away from each other and we may not have seen each other for many years, and yet it is so easy for me to call to mind.

[00:15:06]

I can see in some of your faces right now you're thinking of some of maybe your oldest friends. What I'm proposing is that we are creating our own earth sandwiches with each other.

[00:15:16]

It's the space in between. It bonds us to each other.

[00:15:23]

And one of the things I think that we do really well here at Wellsprings. Chris mentioned that listening to our lives when I was preparing for this message today, I recognized listening to our lives. Now, I may have you know this when you're about to know right now, just turned 20 listening to our lives is now 20 years old. I started in a very different form than it is right now than it's become. I haven't even let it hear wellsprings for about a decade. I love that. I love handing things off and other people getting to create and make it their own stories. But it started because when I was at another congregation in Florida.

[00:15:56]

Heme before I really felt how stories could change my life, that something was missing in this Unitarian Universalist tradition that sometimes puts such an emphasis on what we think and not as much of it as the emphasis on how we relate to each other. And that's the best part for me about what listening to our lives is about. Wellsprings 2.0, as we call it. Yes, it has nine weeks of kind of big theological and spiritual topics we cover. But the best parts of it are the stories. People choosing to open themselves to each other and share their stories. And by the way.

[00:16:33]

Across denominations, through any kind of tradition, when people talk about why they are a part of their church or synagogue or temple society, fellowship communities, you know the unifying answer.

[00:16:50]

Because I have friends there. Because I have friends there.

[00:16:57]

And the ways that friends are generated is by telling and sharing our stories with each other. It's how we sustain our connections in this very relational universe.

[00:17:08]

And sometimes we don't even need to share stories with each other. We don't need to grow up with the same stories. Now, some of you might know that Reverend Lee and I are colleagues here and we're also friends. But she is 13 and 1/2 years younger than I am. So she speaks GIF and meme and all this kind of online stuff, social media.

[00:17:30]

As a native speaker, I do not. And so we now have this running gag between the two of us where I will send her something else. All of you seen this yet? She's seen it. And then I will respond saying I'm never sending you anything ever again until a half hour later. I send her another thing and she's already seen it. It reminds me, if any of you remember in the early days of South Park, there was a really funny episode. I found it funny. That's called Simpsons Already Did It, in which all the characters on the show were re-enacting different scenarios and other characters as Simpsons already did it. So, Lee, you are my Simpsons already did it. And because I'm a little bit older, I from different frames of reference. And so I posted this not too long ago, the interaction about the two of us today in the generational divide. When I send H.R. Puffinstuff and Sigmund and the Sea Monster gifs to illustrate a point, and then a younger friend, Lee responds, asking me to not do that again because she doesn't want anymore nightmare fodder. And then I whine, but I haven't even gotten to my banana splits. Sleestacks or Witchy Poo material yet.

[00:18:38]

Fine. I'm going to go play bizarre 70s childhood by myself. Hashtag Sid and Marty Croft forever. Hashtag Generation X.

[00:18:48]

I can tell you, I mean, those of you remember this. My God, the substances they must have been using back in the 70s. The people who created the programming that I grew up with and actually I don't want to just give all the credit, the substances. I just think they were remarkably creative. And, you know, the thing about this Sleestacks or H.R. Puffinstuff man, those worlds were crazy. They were so far out there and I loved them. And yet sometimes you can tell people at home and they say, I don't want any more nightmares. But I must tell you, this H.R. Puffinstuff one of my personal heroes. My wife and I have pet rabbits and the next rabbit we get I have really been arguing for this for a very long time because my wife, even though she is only a month and two days older than me, does not like Sid and Marty Krofft. But I have to tell you, I've come up with the best rabbit name ever that has been HR Fluffinstuff.

[00:19:34]

Boom.

[00:19:43]

Oh, that headshake. I know it well. You get the name the next one after that.

[00:19:51]

This is what it is when we get to share our stories with our friends, they don't even have to be their stories. It's just a way of letting other people in. To allow them to know us, and Lee has shared a whole bunch of her stories that I am not familiar with because they're not my initial frames of reference and those are the ways that we bond together.

[00:20:09]

This is what happens. It creates connections across generations. Cross distance. Sometimes across our disappointments, inevitable in this life. When we share our stories. We find our friends. And so where we left off at the beginning, opening story. A different image this time. Same book.

[00:20:45]

On that hill. And by the way, how often do you hear it or hear yourself saying it?

[00:20:51]

Friends, maybe you haven't seen for decades, for a long time or years. And we picked up right where we left off. This is a good sign. That you have the shared stories that create the best friendships.

[00:21:08]

And so Bob and Jack are back on that hill and they're climbing that hill that doesn't look very large anymore, as huge as it looked as kids.

[00:21:19]

And they're climbing. But they cannot make it to the top.

[00:21:24]

Because the reason they've gone back to Bexley. It's because Jack, now in his early 60s, is dying of cancer. He cannot make it to the top because he doesn't have the lung capacity anymore. So Bob and Jack climb as high as they can.

[00:21:42]

And then they turn back and come back down the mountain.

[00:21:48]

Two older men recognizing that they can't do what they used to do.

[00:21:53]

But the story remains the same. Can't make it any more to the top of the hill. But they can live out the same story together. These kinds of stories don't end. They

accompanied us all throughout this life. And so I'd ask you today. What stories are you sitting on that you need to share? What stories are you sitting on that other people need to hear? What friendship is waiting for the deeper bonding? Of you sharing those stories with each other.

[00:22:36]

May you live in blessing. Will you pray with me?

[00:22:47]

Breathing in and breathing out. The rules are the spirit, use the breath. We know already that this is a relational universe. That to live is to be in a constant state of exchange.

[00:23:08]

Giving and receiving.

[00:23:12]

And so today, if we see the opportunity, may we take it? To speak the stories most clearly upon our hearts.

[00:23:23]

So that we might be bonded to other hearts more deeply. And more beloved like.

[00:23:34]

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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