

Stewardship of Life Sunday

Outward Bound

John 11: 32-44

Ann Hatfield

Sharing our Stories – Dave Carpenter



Dave Carpenter

I became a member here in 2006 and in that time I've been a ruling elder, a resting elder, I served as a deacon, I serve as a deacon now in fact. I sing in the choir, I've helped out on a number of different events and during all that time I was an alcoholic and I was hiding it from everyone. My closest friends didn't know so it was really scary to come out and talk about it.

When I first when in to treatment, I truly woke up that morning and if you had told me the day before that I was going to wind up in treatment for alcohol addiction, I would have laughed at you. That was impossible.

And before I knew it, 24 hours later, there I was lying in a bed in a treatment center and I was scared to death. It was really at a time when my faith in God and my faith in the church was really struggling because I was so scared and I was so unsure of where I was and what was going on and what people would think of me.

The outpouring of love and support from this church is what kept me going in that time that I was in recovery. I received cards every day that I was there. It became a joke with the staff. They'd say, "Oh Dave's got three more cards today, Dave's got two more cards today. It was my beautiful brothers and sisters in my choir, it was the pastors here at the church, it was other members of the church, the deacons, it was people I didn't even know sending me cards to say "hang in there, we love you, we support you, we want to see you get better, and we know that God has a bigger plan for you." That was really a powerful part of my recovery. It wasn't MY faith that got me through it; it was THEIR faith that got me through it.

One of the biggest challenges that we face as addicts, as alcoholics, is dealing with the guilt and shame that we have because of who we are; because the disease that has taken over taken us. It's the disease that makes us feel that way; it's the disease that says you should feel guilty; you should feel ashamed. And by the way, keep drinking, keep using; that's what the disease wants. So the most important thing we can do is break through that fear of what would people would think of me and how do we get to the other side of that.

I find my hope in the recovery meetings that I attend every day. There are a variety of meetings out there. My personal favorites are AA meetings but there's lots of other ones. As you get out in the world and get around people you are going to find there are hundreds, thousands of us suffer from these things, people from all backgrounds, races, economic situations are all there together because these diseases don't care. These diseases only care about one thing and that is keeping you sick; and you'll find as I did, that there are all kinds of folks out there and the most important part of that is that you belong to that community. And that community will lift you up and will carry you through the problems you are having and help you with your recovery.

The most important thing I found through my recovery process is the joy I get through helping other alcoholics recover as well. I stay sober by helping other alcoholics stay sober as well. Whether it is giving them rides to meetings, talking with them on the phone or just generally knowing that they're there for me and I'm there for them.

When I think about the idea of my being sober the rest of my life not having another drink for the rest of my life, it is very hard to comprehend. That's what they talk about one day at a time. My job is to stay sober today. Not worry about tomorrow or the next day or the next month. But in these meeting rooms, I can talk to men and women who have been sober for 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years; and I see the happiness that they have and the freedom that they have from this addiction and the joy in their lives that I still can't comprehend having but I can see it in other people. So that's where the hope comes from as being part of those communities and seeing folks who have recovered and are living wonderful, happy, productive lives.

If you're dealing with active addiction, if you are a friend or a family member of somebody who is, what I want you to know is that we are here to help you. Westminster loves you just the way you are, we want to see you get better, we want to see be well again and come back to being an active member of our community. So to find that help, contact somebody here. We are a community of faith that loves you and supports you and wants to see you healthy.

The day after I got out of my treatment center, I came back to church. I didn't tell anybody I was coming. I walked into the choir room and was just blown away by the overwhelming response that I got. It was so beautiful. And right then and there it acknowledged for me, that everybody loved me just the way I was and it didn't matter who I was before and that I was battling alcoholism. In fact, they probably loved me more because I came forward and did that. So I share that with you so that maybe you can come forward too and talk about your addiction and your problems and know that everyone here is going to love you just the way you are.

Sharing our Stories – Karen Gadson



I'll be with you all whenever you find yourself in a quiet woods, with the breeze gently passing through the greenery.

I'll be with you whenever you find yourself on the bay, in the ripples of the water that creates a language only a few can read.

I'll be with you all – Always.

That was the note our son, Alex, wrote to us before dying by suicide on May 20, 2016.

Good morning. My name is Karen Gadson. I'm joined here today by my husband, Mark and our daughter, Megan, and I know supported by all of you, our Westminster family, whether you may know us personally or not. As shared in Romans, chapter 12, verse 5:

"So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

My husband, Mark, and our then children Megan and Alex joined Westminster in 2003, having moved from CT. We all quickly found our respective interests – Mark with the music program, our kids with youth group and Alex with boy scout Troop 93, and me with Outreach and Session.

It is about Alex, and others like him, I share this morning. Alex grew up in this church community and had a servant's heart – he was a founding member of the youth-to-youth Honduras partnership, and it was his love for his brothers and sisters in Honduras that he decided to design and construct a Mayan themed playscape for his eagle scout project, that he, Mark and Alex's good friend Kelby Sivek took to Honduras and installed at the Manos Amigas clinic in La Entrada.

Alex was bright, inquisitive, funny...he was an accomplished sailor and musician, passions he and Mark shared together. But Alex also struggled, and struggled hard...with depression and later with alcoholism. And we surely struggled with him.

Alex's mental health and addiction with alcohol often consumed us as a family...he was treated by professionals for his depression, would seek treatment for his alcoholism, get on a good path and be sober, but then relapse. We know this was a living hell for him. Depression and addiction stole Alex from his best self and us. Our guess is the day he decided to end his life was the first time in a long time he felt released from the darkness.

Alex was just 22 when he died. The weight of his death was soul crushing and surreal. I remember Don coming to our home, as we were surrounded by our extended family, and close friends Colleen and John Villella. We cried, prayed and discussed how this would be shared with our Westminster family, along with plans for Alex's memorial service. We all agreed it was important to be honest; we did not want to sweep this under a blanket of euphemisms.

And so we shared at Alex's service – openly and honestly – all that was beautiful about him, and also about the pain that became too much for him to bear. Alex's service was deeply moving and powerful. God's presence was palpable, in word, song and by the community of our Westminster family who came alongside us to celebrate his life and grieve his passing.

As I mentioned earlier, Mark is a musician, and over the years has composed and arranged music...with his first love being jazz. Well before Alex's passing, Mark shared with me that he was working on an arrangement of Amazing Grace. We both were a bit struck by that, as Mark had never chosen to arrange a spiritual piece before, but I remember his comment that he felt called to do it. That arrangement was played at Alex's service as it will be this morning. I have often wondered was that a God thing.

So, what do I want to leave you with this morning.

First and foremost, I want for anyone here (or listening or watching remotely), who may be suffering in silence from addiction, from depression, to please reach out for help. You are a child of God and you are loved. And others of us need to do our part in educating ourselves and breaking down the stigma of mental illness and addiction. Back in 2008, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Everyone I met, who became aware of my circumstances, reached out and was unwavering in their support. Yet with diseases like addiction or depression, we can be quick to cast judgments and turn away. We can and must do better.

Given my family's experience with suicide, we must begin by changing our language around suicide. Words have consequences. Think about it...when someone dies by suicide, we commonly say the individual committed suicide. While the term may seem innocuous, it's actually laden with blame and stigma. Research shows that when stigma is present, people avoid seeking help — help that could be life-saving. For many, if not most, the term 'committed suicide' evokes associations with 'committed a sin' or 'committed a crime' and makes us think about something morally reprehensible or illegal. It implies that the person who died was perpetrator rather than a victim.

Dying by suicide removes culpability from the person who has lost their life and allows a discussion about the disease or disorder from which they were suffering.

The second message I want to leave you with is that faith, particularly when shared in community like this, is a powerful healer. While I deeply miss Alex and wish I could reverse what happened on May 20, 2016, I do know Alex was welcomed with open arms by God, and that gives me enormous peace and comfort. Thank you to so many here who have walked this path with us. I'd like to share from a card we received from a Westminster member...and it reads..."Our family lost a son to suicide 15 years ago – almost to the day of your losing Alex. Many days were hard and sad. But as I look back I have more perspective and more assurance that I never walked them alone. God always seemed to put someone in my life to help. And I am sure that is how God works – just enough light to see a bit further – just when I needed it most."

And my third message is one of hope. I look at our daughter Megan who has turned the tragedy of losing her brother into hope for others, given her work with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and helping to raise critical funds for education, advocacy and research.

September is National Suicide Prevention, and National Drug and Alcohol Addiction Recovery Month...we can all play a role...and it begins by talking about the importance of mental health, talking about addiction...the more open and honest people are in sharing their own stories about themselves and their families, lives will be saved. I believe today is a defining moment in the life of this church as we each consider what we can do to address these critical issues. And I'm truly proud of Westminster's leadership who undoubtedly knew a topic like this is challenging and uncomfortable, but also knew it was the right thing to do.

In closing,

Psalm 139, 7-12

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you. AMEN

Sharing our Stories – Brenda Schivito



Brenda Schivito

My son, Nicholas, was 22 years old, and he lost his life to substance abuse overdose. He had struggled with bipolar disorder and in and out of rehabs. It was just a disease that he was unable to corral on his own. It was something that we kept to ourselves. We kept it hidden. We didn't talk about it. We didn't share it. We shared it with very few people. It was one of shame, embarrassment. The idea of "What did I do wrong?" "What could I have done differently?" You grieve that. You take that with you every day; you wear it on your heart.

After we lost Nick, I knew I had to do something to help others; to raise awareness, to bring attention to this crisis that not only our country is facing but our area – Chester County, the whole state of Pennsylvania. We are the third highest state in addiction-related deaths. I knew I had to do something to help and to carry on and honor Nicholas and do what the Lord has put me here to do in this next chapter of my life.

Through the church I felt Serve Your Neighbor was where I was being led to go. The objective is to educate our church community about addiction and to destigmatize the addiction and from there take our message out into the community to teach others.

I have felt very blessed to be part of a church that can carry forward and be all receiving of those struggling with addiction. I feel very motivated to share my story with others so that they can feel comfortable coming to this place, coming to our church. People that I know here at church have been very, very supportive. More supportive than I could ever have imagined. When you hide behind a stigma, you hide in grief, you hide in shame and embarrassment. You come out of the darkness and you know that there are people here who love you and support you and care for you just as our Almighty God does.

If we understand that Jesus loves us no matter what, we should not feel the embarrassment and shame that so many of us have felt from this horrible disease. I find hope in knowing that recovery is possible and although we experienced the tragic loss of our son, I do know that the chains of addiction that bound him, he's free from that and in his new life with the Lord he has taken us on a journey to help others and he is very much, very much spiritually alive.

Outward Bound John 11: 32-44



Ann Hatfield

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the organization Outward Bound. What began in 1941 as a means to improve the survival chances of shipwrecked seamen has become a network of schools in 33 countries. The founder believed, *“There is more in us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for anything less.”*

It takes courage to test our physical stamina and mental toughness. But in doing so, Outward Bound has prepared people of all ages and backgrounds – including troubled and at-risk youth – to thrive in the classroom, workplace, and wider world.

As we heard from Dave, Karen, and Brenda, much of life takes courage. Let us take a moment to express our appreciation to them for sharing their stories so openly and honestly. I am deeply grateful for their courage.

In our lesson from John’s Gospel, Jesus is with Mary and Martha at the grave of their brother Lazarus. In a heart-stopping moment, Jesus stands at the entrance of the tomb and shouts, “Lazarus, come out!” With what must have been a mix of absolute horror and overwhelming joy, everyone watches as Lazarus – who has been dead for **four days(!)** – staggers blindly from the tomb with hands, feet, and face bound in cloth. Jesus instructs those gathered to unbind Lazarus, and set him free.

Some may doubt the veracity of this story, but the TRUTH of this lesson is as powerful in the 21st century as it was then. It is a promise of HOPE.

There is hope for each of us, because Jesus calls us out of our MOST dead places. We may feel dead in spirit, or dead to the world – life in ruins, relationships at death’s door. Still, Christ calls you and me out of our tombs – out of what binds us – out of our fear and captivity, and sets us free – bringing us to new life.

Tragically, as we heard from Karen and Brenda, the freedom Christ calls us to does not guarantee an easy, problem-free life. However, we trust God has brought freedom, wholeness, and peace to Alex and Nick – honoring the promises made in baptism – we belong to God in life and in death.

I suspect each and every one of us knows a family member or friend who struggles with addiction, depression, or mental health issues. You, yourself, may be facing a challenging road of recovery – a journey that happens one day at a time.

Remember: *“There is more in us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for anything less.”*

Jesus is calling each one of us: COME OUT!

Let us put one foot in front of the other, and leave the darkness of the tomb. God wants to set us free, so that you and I, our families, and ALL God’s children might be unbound from anything that holds us captive. Don’t settle for anything less. Amen.