

## **Ingathering**

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There's a folk story that comes in many forms from many cultures. You may have heard it before. There was once a respected elder, someone who was gathering the wisdom of their years and offering it up as their legacy. This elder noticed that the adults in the generation to follow them were constantly in conflict. There were groups and cliques and factions, led by people who wanted to be seen as having the right answer.

Concerned that their fighting would turn their focus away from the well-being of the community and make them vulnerable to threats, the elder called leaders from all of the factions to come together, and told them to each bring two sticks. This was a strange request, but it came from a revered person, and so they complied.

The rivals eyed each other across the circle as the elder asked them to each take one of their sticks and try to break it. They did so easily. Next, the elder asked them to place the rest of their sticks in the middle of the circle. The elder bundled the sticks together with twine and asked who could break them all at once. They tried, one by one. Perhaps some of the sticks inside the bundle creaked, but the bundle as a whole did not break.

The elder explained that their community was like the bundle of sticks. If they remained disconnected through resentments and bickering, they could be easily broken by the challenges of life and overcome by the forces that would divide what should be whole. If the leaders joined together, bound together in mutual respect and accountability, connected in joy and caring, they were stronger than any one of them could be alone.

Now, there is wisdom in this story. When we can figure out how to be in right relationship, we are better together. Sharing knowledge and resources is a good adaptation for survival.

On the other hand, we are not sticks. Most of us arrive in religious community already feeling broken in some places. Maybe our brokenness is connected to mistakes we have made, or maybe we have been hurt by someone we trusted. Maybe we were dropped into a world that seemed hostile to our survival from day one. Being a little bent and cracked does not mean that you are not also strong. In fact, the experience of pain and healing may lead us to greater skills in compassion. Sometimes, when a person's heart breaks, it opens up wider for to reach out in love. Sometimes, knowing what it means to struggle is a necessary ingredient for knowing how to help. This congregation is filled with resilient people who are both broken and whole, both fallible and unfailingly loved by the Eternal.

In addition, we are not sticks. We are not stiff, dry, parts, disconnected from the roots that give us life. We are living beings, able to bend and adapt. In the story, the sticks were all arranged side by side, pointing in the same direction. That is one way to organize, and is often the best strategy. Showing up to protest racist immigration policies, following the leadership of those most impacted as we face the same direction and are bound together in a common purpose, is such a demonstration of strength. Organizing side-by-side amplifies hope and energy as we resist the forces that threaten our families and neighbors. For other times, there are other strategies for being strong together. We can embrace one another, catch one another as we fall, support one another as we climb. We can flex and built and rearrange. Join together, yes, and realize that there are infinite shapes and ways of moving and being that we can choreograph as accomplices for the Spirit of Life.

Finally, we are not sticks. We are still growing. Each one of us gives and receives support as we weave our lives together with each other, with our communities, and with the source of blessing as we understand it to be. If we do fall apart, individually or collectively, we can reconnect, probably in ways that are different from before. Human beings make mistakes. We have disagreements. We drift apart, intentionally and unintentionally. The illusion of separateness does not have to be the end of the story. We covenant, we break our covenants, we call each other back into covenant. We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

Today, we celebrate Ingathering. Today is a good day to begin again in love. We start this journey anew, mindful of the mission and calling of this congregation. We move forward, moving in different ways and bringing our diverse gifts and experiences, yet traveling in the same direction. This will be a year of risk-taking, discovery, and hope. It is good to be together.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.