

## “Trust”

Rev. Emily Meyer

Before I begin the sermon, I'd like to share this story, from NPR's weekly segment, "StoryCorps". This is an interview of 11-year-old Benny Smith, conducted by his mom, Christine Ristaino...

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God our Creator, from our Savior Jesus Christ, and from the life-giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit. AMEN

An 11-year-old boy whose love for exploration and science cannot be quelled by epilepsy, and - after a year of intense medical procedures and testing and missed school - whose hopes for the future are about his sister's well-being, rather than his own.

Some highlights for me in this story - which, of course, made me cry driving down France Avenue on Friday morning errands - were Benny's ability to name his depression and anger, his ability to admit that he was feeling glum and angry about his situation - and then move from anger to a deeper realization: that "there's a galaxy of experiences". I hear in this an admission that he has accepted his illness and the realities it will impose on his life, and he's been able to find peace in knowing that his galaxy of experiences will be different from those of others, but that doesn't have to mean that his life is empty, or lost, or forfeit in any way. His passions and interests and ability to love are still readily apparent.

For Benny may have experienced depression and anger; I'm sure he felt extremely glum as the rug was pulled out from under him, but he hasn't stayed there. "I'm so proud of you for being so courageous in the face of something so scary", says his mom. His courage has manifested itself in his ability to accept what is, move through his feelings of depression and anger, and find a new ground - as my friend/mentor/colleague Leni de Mik would say.

Leni is writing a book on "groundlessness", which I get to edit on occasion. "Groundlessness" is the experience of our world shifting, of everything getting topsy-turvy. Leni describes these times of transition in the metaphor of story: pre-seizures, Benny's story was one of a thoughtful brother who loved science, who saw a future exploring space, maybe. When the seizures began, Benny's reality shifted. Benny could have chosen to cling to the reality he wanted to have, pre-seizures, or he could let that vision die and discover a new life in his new reality of epilepsy. As Leni writes, "We can take the old story with us and interweave the newly born with the weight of the dead."

Jesus urges the rich man to let go of dead weight, the stuff that is keeping him from entering the new story, a new life. In fact, the only thing this man lacks, the only thing keeping this man from entering the realm of God, right here and now, is his need to cling to his accumulated "story"; his story of self-righteousness and achievement; his story of "me".

'Cuz I don't really buy that this guy is "humbly" asking Jesus what he can do to enter eternal life; I'm pretty sure he thinks he's already got that sewn up.

For starters, the man prostrates himself and flatters Jesus in a way that - biblically speaking - only those who know they're in trouble do. And, he can't admit to any weakness: he's wealthy, he's got status in the community, and he has followed the letter of the law "since his youth"; really, he's asking Jesus to affirm that everything he's done to date has been perfect, and then Jesus should hand him the keys to the kingdom as reward for a job well done.

But this is not how it works: we cannot hope to walk into eternal life carrying all the baggage we've obtained in this one. We cannot hope to walk into salvation, or follow Jesus, when we're lugging around all this stuff that we've used to feel important or worthy or sufficient or meaningful. All of that needs to be left in the baggage check. In order to pick up our cross, we have to set all our "stuff" down; we travel light into new life in Christ.

The disciplines of Lent help us do this: In fasting we let go of the story that says we have to keep achieving and doing more and better; we sell everything we have and give away our autonomy; we give over control and practice trusting in the God who provides all that we need. In study we open our hearts and minds to new ideas, to hearing a new narrative about who God is and how God is at work in the world. In prayer we move beyond words to a free-fall of faith; we let ourselves be held by the God who loves us, practicing living each day trusting that God is upholding us.

All of these are tools to help us relinquish stories that bind us to warped views of reality; stories that hold us in thrall to our own accomplishments and successes; stories that perpetuate barriers between ourselves, others and God.

For we want to hold onto this narrative of ourselves. We want to keep ourselves - our accomplishments, our achievements, our successes - at the forefront of the story; we've got to keep our shields up, lest we feel the great atrocities of our times: out of control, insufficient, "weak". And we're not ready to admit to any lacking - even if it means salvation and eternal life.

Yet, as Brene Brown points out in *Daring Greatly*, it is precisely our efforts to make ourselves invulnerable that cause us the most pain. She writes: "When we don't acknowledge how and where we're tender, we're more at risk of getting hurt." (pg. 39)

Benny, at age 11, admits to depression and anger - and is able to move into a new narrative with new-found contentment and even joy. Avoiding or resisting groundlessness actually makes our times of transition more frustrating and challenging; and makes them more protracted as we weave our new story with the weight of the dead.

The man in our gospel story has everything in a row; all is as it should be - and Jesus pulls the rug out from under him. Jesus throws the man a curve - a curve he's asked to have thrown - but once he sees it coming, it's a pitch he'd rather duck. It would be extremely uncomfortable, unfamiliar, unorthodox, unlike him, uncontrollable, if he were to sell everything - all of these ego-comforts that he's amassed; these shields that keep him safe in a cocoon of "got-it-right".

So long as we have our “wealth” - our store of whatever it is that helps us feel invulnerable - we prohibit salvation; we prevent ourselves from knowing and/or experiencing God’s love.

But here’s the good news. Jesus loves this man.

Jesus loves the rich man - not for his earthly successes of wealth and power and virtue - Jesus could give a rip about these. Jesus loves this man - but certainly not for devout obedience. Jesus loves this man because he was open - if only for a moment - to the possibility that he didn’t have all the answers. Jesus loves this man because he showed up and asked a question. Jesus loves this man, precisely because Jesus knows the rich man won’t be able to accomplish what Jesus asks. Jesus loves this man - for no particular reason other than, he exists, and he is a child of God.

“I love you very much, Benny.” “I love you, too, Mom.”

Benny’s mom clearly adores her child, she is proud of him for his courage in the face of something so scary; she is grateful for his ability to comfort her, sometimes; she is amazed at the wild imaginings that go on in his brain; she loves her child.

And Benny’s friends must love him, too - and Benny his friends; they’ve stuck by him through a very unsettling time. “With friends you are invincible,” he says.

With God all things are possible.

Huge swaths of humanity have chosen to interpret God’s ability to make things happen as an ability based solely in huge shows of power. But listen to Benny’s story. Benny doesn’t feel invincible because his friends are stronger than someone else, Benny feels invincible because his friends have been present.

Far from mighty displays, Jesus reveals to us a God who is vulnerable and humble and “weak”, in the estimation of the world: “weakened” by a love stronger than death. With God all things are possible because God loves the world: God shows up; God is present with us through everything.

That’s what Lent is about, practicing awareness of God’s presence with us: a chance to fast from whatever stories hold us back from a deeper awareness of God and prohibit our experience of God’s new life; a time to relinquish control, to be released from the burdens of our expectations and the story that defined us; a chance to be opened through prayer to a deeper trust in God; a chance to study God’s Word and hear in conversation the new story God is shaping for us; a chance to move into that new story of resurrection without the weight of the dead.

Embracing these practices make the times of shifting ground far more tolerable - even exciting. When the ground shakes, God is doing something new. God is instigating a transformation. God is rolling stones away and ushering us into a whole new life.