

The Way to Follow
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By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory
Acts 9:1-19

Evanston First Bank and Trust, the bank just around the corner where Northminster has had accounts for years, will soon become Byline Bank. At the end of 2017 the Evanston bank was bought by Byline and as a consequence will assume a new name. It seems to have been a good business move for both the Evanston bank and Byline, but I am saddened for the name change. The inclusion of the word Trust in First Bank's name carries great meaning, for it describes the type of relationship people have with their bank. It is a relationship of trust. Trust that is earned and, as we remember from a decade ago when many banks failed, that trust can be broken. Then, many Americans preferred to put their money in banks in other countries rather than their local banks. To invest your money at a bank is to trust it.

The root of the word for financial affairs, *fiduciary*, emphasizes this covenantal relationship. *Fiduciary* is derived from a term popularized by reformer Martin Luther, *fides*. In the Middle Ages, *fides* was a word used to describe faith and *fiducia* meant personal trust.

One's banking relationship is, ultimately, a relationship of trust. It is a relationship that includes risk and a relationship of investment. At a deeper level but with a similar principal, this also describes our relationship with God. *Fiducia* was the only true faith and, in Martin Luther's understanding, means that we invest our lives with God, we trust God with our whole beings, even and especially in times of uncertainty and risk.

Our Scripture for this morning focuses on two men: Saul, a Pharisee and a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, who acted as the ringleader of the persecutors of Jesus' followers; and Ananias, a devout disciple of the Lord living in Damascus. Saul was a known enemy of the Jews following in the Way, a movement of people within Judaism, like Ananias, who believed that the Risen Christ was the Messiah. It was a movement that Saul and the high priests in Jerusalem saw as a threat to the synagogues and their leadership; it was a movement these leaders wanted to see disappear.

It is as the disciple Stephen is being dragged out of Jerusalem and stoned by enemies of the church for his bold proclamations about Jesus that we first encounter Saul of Tarsus. Saul observes Stephen's stoning and scripture tells us, he "approved of their killing him." (Acts 8:1) Stephen's was the first of many disciples' murders and imprisonments in Jerusalem. Today's narrative begins describing Saul's continued hate for the disciples of the Lord as he is "still breathing threats and murder" against them. (Acts 9:1) We also learn that he is travelling to Damascus to continue to persecute them. Saul's mission is to find followers of the Way and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried in front of the Sanhedrin and imprisoned.

Damascus is 130 miles northeast of Jerusalem, but the news of the disciples' persecution, and who had done the persecuting, had travelled fast. Many followers of the way had migrated from Jerusalem up north, making Saul's trip necessary. But things do not go as Saul plans. God intervenes and causes his blindness, which he endures for three days as he is led by his travelling companions.

During those three days, while blind Saul is being led to Damascus, Ananias encounters God in a vision, a vision with a specific request: "Get up and go to the street called Straight (a

main street in the city)...and look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." (Acts 9: 11-12) Ananias responds hesitantly: "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem..." (Acts 9:13) He continues, reminding God that Saul has been tasked by the chief priests in Jerusalem to capture all disciples, which would include capturing Ananias. Surely someone else can act as God's messenger! Remember, Ananias doesn't know what had just happened to Saul. He doesn't know that the Risen Christ had confronted Saul on the road to Damascus just as Christ is now confronting him. Ananias' human reluctance reminds us that he was just like us and, despite his faith, he doubted God's direction. God's response to Ananias' push back is simply, "Go." Ananias doesn't say another word. Despite his doubt, his fear and his concerns, Ananias follows. Ananias trusts.

This narrative, often called the Damascus Road story, focuses on Saul's conversion from an enemy of the church to its most ardent disciple. He goes from a man dedicated to destroying the Way to a man equally dedicated to building it up. It is a dramatic story of change. But, it is also a story of a man demonstrating his deep trust in God, and revealing to us the Way to follow the Lord.

The disciple Ananias has a brief appearance in Acts, just this encounter with Saul. There is no mention that he later proclaims the gospel to the Gentiles, founds churches in urban centers across the Roman Empire, or stands true to the gospel while on trial for his faith. Ananias is not one we think of as being a Bible "all-star." Ananias was a devout disciple of the Lord, one of whom Saul intended to persecute. He is a devoted messenger of faith who shows us that the Way to follow the Lord is to trust. Trust the Lord when you are vulnerable; trust the Lord when you are uncertain; trust the Lord when you are scared; trust the Lord like children trust their parents.

One night, long ago in Brussels, Belgium, a family endured a terrible house fire. Luckily, the parents and children all got out of their burning home, but the fire-year-old, presumably wanting something left inside, went back into flames without his family's knowledge. They saw him standing, terrified, in a second story window. Smoke completely obscured his vision outside. But, his father could see him. "Jump! I will catch you!" The child protested, "But Daddy, I can't see you!" The father cried, "But I can see you and that's all that matters. Jump!" Trusting his dad to catch him, the boy blindly leapt out of the window into the safety and love of his father's arms.

Trusting the Lord's will for his life, Ananias jumped into the lion's den, so to speak, as he went to Saul, whom he knew to be his persecutor, and he courageously speaks as God instructed. He declared that the Lord Jesus had sent him to Saul so that Saul might be filled with the Holy Spirit and regain his sight. Ananias confirmed any question Saul had of his faith by naming it to him. He exposes himself to being captured and possibly killed. Ananias took a leap of faith; Ananias teaches us the Way to follow.

Friends, can we trust and follow, not knowing how it is all going to turn out? It is not easy. We are so good at being independent! And it is so much more comfortable when we can stay in control. We are privileged with the resources to control a lot, except the most important stuff — like keeping our loved ones from illness, enabling them to get a job, curing their loneliness, preventing their miscarriages, protecting them from violence, taking away their pain, telling them they are loved so they finally believe it — the stuff of life.

For this stuff — the stuff that leaves us exposed and helpless — for this stuff, we must trust and follow. We must trust enough to be able to fall asleep knowing that God is awake, and that “even the darkness is not dark” to God but “as bright at the day.” (Psalm 139:12) We must trust enough to believe what the Psalmist sings, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” (Psalm 139:5) We must trust enough even if we are hemmed in sitting on a gurney or beside a grave. We must trust enough to go, like Ananias did, even if we are unsure, even if we have doubts, even if we are afraid. Go. This is the Way we follow.

Hebrews 11:1 declares: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is trusting what we can’t see but what we know exists. This is much easier said than lived. We cannot see God like we can see a parent but we do see God in different faces and places throughout our lives. I invite you to take a moment to recall a time when you saw God through another person, through nature, through music, through meditation, through a child’s smile, through silence. These are the moments, residing forever in our hearts, that enable us to make that leap out of the window into the air knowing that God will catch us, knowing that we will be okay, knowing that God is with us.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a best-selling author, a professor and an Episcopalian priest. In 2006, she came to a crossroads when she left parish ministry and, in many ways, her identity as priest, to an unknown future. She jumped out of the window unsure of where, or how, she would land. But she knew God would catch her. She reflects: “Faith as radical trust became even more important to me during this time, because so many of my certainties about who I was and what I was supposed to be doing fell away that faith was really what I had left.” (Abernathy 2007)

Through trusting God, you enable yourself to be messenger of faith, a messenger that may be used to change the world, just like God used Ananias. No, Ananias is not the one we remember in this Damascus Road story. We remember Saul. But without Ananias, Saul cannot be converted. Rather than choosing to give Saul back his sight through divine action as God took his sight, God works through Ananias, a human disciple.

Ananias trusted God enough to let himself be used and, in doing so, enabled this great disciple of Jesus Christ to begin his ministry. But Ananias didn’t know how it was all going to turn out; he just knew he believed in God and he believed in Jesus the Christ. He trusted and he followed. Even if your act of trusting and following doesn’t change the world, it will, in some small way, change the person you encounter and it will change you. May we all become such messengers of faith, giving one another, our community, and our world hope, confidence and peace. Amen.

Work Cited

Abernathy, Bob and Barbara Brown Taylor. March 9, 2007. WTTW: Religion and Ethics Newsweekly: Barbara Brown Taylor.
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