

Storytellers play a vital role in society; they can help us recognize and explore issues or situations we may be afraid of, confused by, or just don't understand. One such gifted storyteller, the Rev. Jerome Berryman has written a story that might help us better understand today's Gospel. It's a story about the church, a priest, a tree, and children.

It begins by describing a church building that was as beautiful as it was large; complete with stained glass windows, ornately carved wooden pews, marble floors, and rooms upon rooms for worship, study, prayer, music, serving the community, and meetings. There was even a room few people ever entered, most had forgotten it was there and couldn't remember what it for. It was hard to get to; you had to walk down a winding staircase into the darkest part of the basement and open a heavy wooden door to enter this room. Inside there were no windows, and the only furniture was an old wooden chair. One day, the priest was walking through the church building and went into that room, just to make sure everything was alright, that no one had misused it or left something important in there. As he glanced around, the priest thought everything looked okay. But a second look revealed a small crack had appeared in the otherwise smooth concrete floor. The priest asked the Junior Warden to look into that crack. The Junior Warden reported the discovery of a small plant growing in the crack. They decided to consult the Senior Warden who suggested to pull up the plant and repair the floor. But none of them proved strong enough to pull up the little green shoot delicately poking its way up into the room. So, they decided to cut it off and hope the lack of light and water would prohibit further growth. But the little plant had moxie. It kept growing. So, the priest and the wardens decided to do what a lot of people do when they feel powerless or helpless or don't understand: they decided to ignore it. Left alone the little plant grew and grew and grew. It grew into a tree, with branches that pushed through walls and floors to fill the rooms of the church. The tree grew so tall and so wide it eventually pushed down all the beautiful church walls, and twisted all the wooden pews to bits, and smashed through the stained glass windows until there was a gigantic tree surrounded by the destruction of the church: shattered colorful pieces of stained glass, splintered wood, and crumbled bits of stone and marble. The destruction was so devastating and dramatic it was all some people could see, after all they had been ignoring the tree and its growth for so long, they had completely forgotten about it. And because the only thing they could focus on was the destruction of the church, they were unable to see the living tree in its midst.

But what looked like a mess of destruction that was deeply mourned by the priest and wardens and many people of the church was seen quite differently by the children. The children could see the tree, big and beautiful and just bursting with life. The children could also see the bits of broken glass and wood and stone of the church. And, what's more, the children knew what to do with it all. The children picked up the pieces of the church and began putting them on the tree, where the pieces somehow became part of the tree of life, forming new windows and altars and pews, and the church was not destroyed; it was renewed, with life at its center instead of empty rooms.

And so it went, the story goes, until many years later, when another priest was walking through the building, checking it over and praying as she went, as some priests are want to do. She opened a heavy wooden door to a dark room in the basement at the end of a long flight of winding stairs, and she noticed, near a wooden chair, a crack had formed in the cement floor.

Because this is a Godly Play story, the author isn't going to give us a moral summary of what he wanted us to get out of it. Godly Play stories ask the listener questions called wondering questions like: "I wonder what part of this story is just for you?" "I wonder what bumped you out of the story?" And, "I wonder what this story could really be?". The purpose of wondering questions is to invite the listener and storyteller to go deeper into the story, in the hopes that is where both will encounter God.

As we wonder about this story, we might also wonder what it has to do with today's Gospel. For me, this story is a beautiful way of saying that God is about life and renewal, not destruction. What we may see as destruction is what can happen when we ignore the Presence of the life-giving Holy Spirit in our midst. It is also a way of reminding us we humans can too easily forget that our own creations, as beautiful and meaningful and practical as they may be are not the same thing as God's creation. And it can show us that all things, no matter how big or beautiful will one day come to an end. And while that can feel like the end of our world to us, it is not the end of the world, or even whatever it is God is up to, and where we see destruction, God may be at work transforming, growing and renewing, doing that marvelous mysterious work of resurrection.

That may be what Jesus was getting at in today's Gospel when he was talking to his followers about the temple, its imminent destruction and what that means. The temple Jesus was referring to was the temple in Jerusalem, which we all know was destroyed in the year 70AD. The temple was important to the Jewish people, as it represented to them a thousand years of God's relationship with God's people. The temple was also a marvel of engineering and architectural magnificence. From it's

golden outer wall intended to reflect the light of the morning sun to its ornate floors and pillars to its large rooms and courtyards. The credit for the building of this temple was given to Herod the Great who wanted it to stand for centuries as a symbol of his legacy. Which means this temple had both religious and political significance. And it is all too easy to sit in the midst of such grandeur and mistake it for God's blessing and presence that will manifest in the permanence of such a structure. Jesus may have been warning his followers the destruction of such magnificence doesn't mean God has been destroyed, nor that God is no longer with them. It just means all things in this world come to an end. Every spring will have its autumn and winter. Every life will have its death. Nothing is immune to this inevitability: not people or institutions or governments or corporations or innovations or traditions, or buildings, even if they look large and grand and spectacular.

It can be tempting to hear this message and fall into despair, to mistake Jesus' words to mean there is no hope. After all, when we've put our total and complete trust in a person, or a corporation, or an institution or a government to provide us with a job or a purpose or something we need to succeed in life and they fail to deliver, it can feel like life as we've known it has ended, that there is no hope, and our lives have been shattered like the pieces of the church in the story. And even though despair can seem like the popular response when things go wrong, it is not what Jesus said is the response for his followers. Instead, he prescribed something much harder to do: to endure.

Endurance is a tough practice in a time when people are often lifted up for walking away from institutions like the church and then badmouthing them, or when escapism is what society prescribes for getting through tough times or self-medicating seems justified. I wonder if that is because endurance can be mistaken for staying in abusive situations, when that is not what endurance is. Endurance is not passive and is much more resilient and hopeful, pointing to resurrection life.

Former Bishop of Durham and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has a brilliant way of describing the practice of endurance in just three words: Plant a tree. To him, trees are a powerful symbol of hope and planting a tree is an act of defiance to those who say everything in the world is terrible and hopeless. Even planting one tree, he says, is a way of saying whatever is happening, won't be forever, the odds are the tree will live longer than whatever difficult or despairing time in history.

And he isn't wrong. Trees are remarkable. Their process of photosynthesis removes carbon dioxide from the air and replaces it with oxygen. Want to counter your carbon emissions impact on the environment? Plant a tree. Trees provide food and habitat for other animals and insects. Pine and spruce trees repel mosquitoes, as any person who has ever had to sleep outside can tell you. Trees are renewable

resources as my friends in paper industries and tree farms can tell you. The very pews you are currently sitting on are made from trees. In a society that celebrates consuming and taking, planting a tree is a strong counter-cultural statement because trees give back to the world more than they take from it.

Anyone can plant a tree. You don't need specialized degrees or equipment to do it. My husband and I rent our house, but that has not stopped us from planting trees on the property. Our landlord encourages us to do so because planting trees improves his property. Trees don't have to be expensive. And once established require little care. Planting a tree can be a theological statement saying no matter how bad the world seems to be, or how the systems we are familiar with seems to be failing, the story is not over, there will be a better day, God will and can create life from destruction, just like God did through Jesus' resurrection.

Will planting a tree solve all of life's problems for all people for all time? Of course not! But it is a way to respond to the anxieties and despair of the world by showing a belief that there is more to life than what we can see, that there is a future, even if we can't control it or define it. Sometimes it can be easy to forget that part of following Jesus means seeing life where others see destruction and remembering that God won't abandon us to our destruction but is at work in the world.

When we hear expressions of despair, perhaps we can find ways to respond that express the Love of God in Christ like the children in the story who were able to rebuild the church from its pieces of destruction, whether its by planting a tree, volunteering to help with a ministry here at Church of the Good Shepherd, purchasing the things we need from businesses that support people instead of corporate greed, like buying coffee at our CrossRoads Café coffee shop ministry, helping take care of building by picking up trash in the yard, making sure we leave any space better than we found it - keeping those who come after us in mind, there are lots of ways our actions can tell the story of God's healing and renewing Love in our midst, which might help more people see that love and become part of it themselves, bringing renewal to the church and the world.