

“Braving Connection and Building Trust”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 17, 2021

There is a folktale that comes from the country of Ethiopia in East Africa. In its many retellings, the exact plot has some variations and the characters are slightly different. At the core of the story is the need to bring two people together whose relationship is strained.

As the story goes, a woman married a man in her village whose first wife died. We'll call her, Ayele. The man has a young son who is heartbroken over his mother's death.

Ayele is eager to win over her new stepson. She speaks softly to him, but he turns away. She prepares delicious meals for him, but he refuses to eat. She sews him a new pair of pants, but he refuses to wear them. This goes on for several months, and Ayele doesn't know what to do.

Ayele's village has a healer, a medicine man to whom people turn when they are sick or hurt. Usually, Ayele tried to solve her own problems, but this time she goes to the healer to ask for his help.

Ayele approached the healer's hut and saw that the door was open. "I can hear you at the door," he said. "Come in."

"What is the trouble?" He asked.

Ayele introduced herself and explained the situation. "Make me a potion or an amulet," she said. "Anything to make the child respond to me!"

The healer thought this over. After a few moments, he said, "I can make you a potion. But this potion requires a special ingredient that will be dangerous to secure. You must bring me the whisker of a living lion."

Ayele was shocked but agreed to bring back the whisker.

That night, she tossed and turned thinking of how she could acquire whisker from a live lion.

The next day, she left the house with a bowl of meat. She went to a small stand of trees where a lion was known to live. At the edge of the trees, she quietly set the bowl down on the grass and then backed away and went home.

The next day at the same time, she returned with another bowl of food.

She saw that the bowl from the previous day was empty. She set the new bowl down and again quietly left and went home.

Ayele kept this up for months. She never saw the lion during this time but knew from the footprints on the ground that it was the lion eating the food.

Then one day Ayele arrived, and the lion was sitting and waiting for her at the spot where she brought the food.

Ayele sat and waited while the lion ate. She decided this was the right time to ask the lion for one of its whiskers.

She reached out to gently pat the lion's head, and said, "Oh, Lion. I am in great need of one of your whiskers. May I please take one?" The lion bowed its head slightly, and Ayele plucked one whisker from its cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

Ayele left and quickly ran to the hut of the medicine man. "I have it! I have it! I have the lion's whisker!"

The medicine man greeted her as she entered. "You do? Let me see it."

Ayele handed the whisker to him. The healer examined the whisker and said, "You now have everything you need to earn the boy's love," and he threw the whisker into the fire.

"What are you doing?!" Ayele said, "Do you know how long it took me to get that whisker? How many bowls of food I brought to the lion?"

"You do not need a potion to win your stepson's love," the healer said. "You now know what to do."

Ayele thought about this and returned home.

##

This is a sermon about trust.

I'll admit that it scares me to make this claim.

Trust is such a loaded word, and these days just hearing it might make you snicker. “Who can you trust these days?” You might think.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, which measures levels of trust around the world for major societal institutions, most of us these days do not trust government leaders, journalists, CEOs, or religious leaders to do what is right.¹

Trust can be so fragile. It is hard to build and harder to keep. Yet, trust is vital to our relationships. Without trust, our relationships become brittle and easily come apart.

Charles Feltman is a leader in organizational development. In *The Thin Book of Trust*, he defines the act of trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s action.”

When we trust another person, we are willing to make something important to us vulnerable to what they may do or say.

I invite you to think for a moment about something you value that you have chosen to make vulnerable to another person’s actions. (pause)

Is it your health?

Is it your family’s health?

Is it your commitment to your work?

Your love of being in the outdoors?

Your need for a friend who listens well?

Each day we are confronted with the question of whether we will choose to take the risk of making something or someone we value vulnerable to another’s actions — from the microcosm of our own households or most intimate friendships to our participation in the larger public life of community.

¹ <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>

This vulnerability is apparent to me each time I cross the street and there is a car coming down the road. It is even more apparent when my seven year-old is with me. I tentatively step into the crosswalk and then wait to see if the car actually slows down before I go any farther.

Maybe you notice this vulnerability when someone asks you the simple but loaded question, “How are you?” And the truth is not easy. The truth is you’re feeling terrible. Do you risk sharing that with whomever may have just asked that innocent question?

In the folk tale I shared, Ayele chooses to take multiple risks of vulnerability - reaching out to her stepson, seeking the help of the healer, taming the lion, and returning home to try building the relationship yet again.

Brené Brown, the social science researcher, professor, and writer, likens trust to a marble jar. She says that trust is built in small moments and with each trustworthy moment, a marble goes in the jar. When the jar is full, we feel in our bones that we can really trust someone. And, when trust is broken, many marbles come spilling out.

Just think of that “how are you?” moment. Maybe one day you decide to take a risk and tell someone you don’t know very well what’s really going on in your life. That the cancer is back. That you just lost your job. That your kid has been home sick for far too many days and you are bone-tired. That person listens attentively, shows empathy, and really hears you. That’s a marble-worthy moment.

We need to trust and to be trusted if we are to be in relationship with others. When we have trust, we are able to work towards common goals, to offer love and care in deeper ways, and to feel more secure in the world.

Yet, to move towards trust can feel very risky especially when the relationship is one that really matters.

I experienced this not too long ago in a conversation I had with my brother. My brother had recently completed training as a law enforcement officer just before the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests across the country in the summer of 2020. My brother and I have a close and caring relationship and have often held starkly different opinions about things. We have engaged in lively conversations about religion and politics - topics that are often sensitive ones with family members. So, when my brother called me up to talk about the interactions between police officers and protestors that summer, I wasn’t surprised. But, I was anxious about

how the conversation might go. My brother and I viewed the unfolding events from very different perspectives. My sympathies were much more with the protestors. His sympathies were much more with the police officers.

Throughout the conversation, my heart was racing. I wasn't in physical danger, but my body was having a stress response to a feeling of threat - the imagined threat that our relationship would not endure this difficult conversation.

Two things felt important to me as we spoke: my own justice-based value system and also my relationship with my brother. Both of these felt vulnerable in that moment.

Our relationships - with those we know well and love and also with strangers - are riddled with moments of vulnerability that expose the potential for that relationship to either move into deeper connection and trust or to break.

There are lots of very good reasons that we might determine that we are not ready to take that risk of vulnerability. Perhaps, like Ayele's stepson in the folk tale, you are deeply grieving and not yet ready for the emotional exposure of opening up. There may be power dynamics at play that are out of your control that create more potential for harm. Maybe you experienced behaviors of betrayal in your upbringing that severely distorted your sense of trust, and it is slow and painful work to be able to take the risk of trusting again.

It is so important to the trust we have in ourselves to have this awareness and to bring that into our relationships as well.

Trust is complex, and Brené Brown shares seven elements of trust in her book *Dare to Lead* that I find helpful in really breaking down how trusting relationships are built.²

Number one is Boundaries. "You respect my boundaries, and when you're not clear about what's okay and not okay, you ask. You're willing to say no."

Next is Reliability. You do what you say you'll do. You don't over promise and you fulfill your commitments.

Accountability. "You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends."

² <https://daretolead.brenebrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BRAVING.pdf>

Next is Vault. This one is about confidentiality. You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share. You keep them in the vault.

Integrity. "You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them."

Nonjudgment. "I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment."

And, finally, generosity. "You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others."

These seven elements make the acronym, B-R-A-V-I-N-G.

At the end of that conversation with my brother, I was surprised to find that not only had our relationship endured but also my trust in him was stronger. Using these seven elements, I better understand why that is.

I knew he was coming from a place of integrity in wanting to really listen to what I had to say. For my part, I tried to keep my judgments at bay and to extend generosity to his words and intentions without sacrificing the values that were most important to me to express. Also, after many years of knowing one another and going through our own ups and downs, the marble jar was pretty full.

I didn't expect this emotionally-fraught conversation to end with me feeling even closer to my brother, and, yet, it did.

This experience gives me hope. Given how flawed I know I am, it gives me hope that the possibility of trust is still present.

The truth is trust isn't a "one and done" deal. It's never final, and all of us do this imperfectly. We add marbles and we lose marbles all the time. We are likely to disappoint others and ourselves.

Being in relationship is risky, and this is why our intentionality matters. We can't eliminate the possibility that we will have our feelings hurt, or that something important to us is not treated with as much care as we want. But, we can make it more possible that trust can be built and maintained with the people in our lives.

I don't know how the story of Ayele and her stepson ends. The listener is left to fill in the blanks. I don't imagine that it was the case that Ayele returned home and her stepson instantly fell into her loving embrace. Instead, I imagine that Ayele took small steps to put those marbles in the jar. She made him meals, offered encouragement, listened well, and slowly and over time, their love and trust grew strong.

In our most intimate relationships and in community, let us be brave and move towards trust. Let us risk, where we can, revealing our truest selves and vulnerable hearts. Let us take care with what is entrusted to us. And may we do so with abundant compassion and bountiful grace.

So may it be.