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Connect: Trust

Acts 9:1-19

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² 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."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

(Slide 1: Connect: trust)

After three days of doing battle with the great hordes of himalayan blackberry brambles I uncovered a squared paned woven wire fence between the neighbor's property and mine. About half way up in the center square of fencing appeared a small round face. Small round eyes peered curiously to and fro until they spied 3 years old Gwen playing on the grassy lawn behind me. Her delighted giggle drew Gwen's attention and soon small body parts were attempting to ooze through the fence in pursuit of

their new-found friend. The girl's grandmother came, lifted her over the fence and the girls ran off together to play.

Children are naturally friendly.

(Slide 2: Potential friends and playmates on the journey of life)

Still fresh from God with the truth of who we really are still clear in their minds and hearts: they know instinctively that every other child of God is a potential friend and welcome playmate on the journey of life.

They trust, incautiously, injudiciously, unreservedly, expecting each new friend to be delightful.

That's probably why it seemed so much easier to make friends when we were kids.

As we get older we become more wary.

The adults in our lives teach us to be cautious, with good reason.

They tell us, "Don't talk to strangers."

They teach us that not everyone is meant to be your friend.

Then our own experiences teach us that not everyone can be trusted.

Some people aren't very nice.

Some people betray our trust.

And some people are downright dangerous.

(slide 3: trust and danger)

Saul was dangerous.

Ananias obviously had a deep faith and trust in God.

- He wasn't freaked out by the idea of God talking to him in a vision. When God called his name he responded like the prophets of old, "Here I am, Lord!"
- He was completely cool with receiving street directions from the beyond, can't be worse than Google maps, right?
- and had no objections to being asked to cure blindness by laying his hands on a stranger.
- Ananias trusted God with all of that weirdness.

But Saul was dangerous.

Saul had been torturing, imprisoning and publicly executing Christians all around Jerusalem. Saul had incited and overseen the stoning of Stephen, just a little while ago.

Ananias trusted God, but he didn't trust Saul.

But God said, go anyway, because God had plans for Saul.

Ananias didn't trust Saul, but Ananias did trust God.

If I were Ananias I would have been imagining all kinds of possible horrible outcomes on the walk to Straight street.

God wouldn't lie, but maybe Saul's conversion was temporary and eventually Saul would turn on Ananias and kill him.

Maybe once Saul was healed he would realize that there was no money in being a Christ follower and he would go back to working for the Sanhedrin and turn in the whole church to the authorities.

Maybe, Saul would reject Ananias' gospel witness and Ananias would end up a martyr like Stephen shortly after his arrival at Straight street..

Being stoned to death sounds like a really unpleasant way to die!

But Ananias keep walking forward, down Straight street, to the house of Judas. He went inside and there was Saul, just as God had described him. Blind, weak, crouched on the floor and praying.

(Slide 4: The truth of who we are: Beloved children of God on this journey of life together)

And the truth of who we all are in God: beloved children on this journey of life together, became clear like the trust of a child.

Ananias put his hands on Saul's blind face and called him brother.

I find that the older I get the harder it is for me to make new friends --

I'm old enough to have experienced my fair share of hurts and betrayals. I've learned exactly why my parents told me not to talk to strangers and taught my own children the same.

I've learned to be wary of letting people in, even when I have no evidence that they have ever done anything remotely as scary as Saul did.

But Ananias challenges me.

Ananias was willing to trust God -- not blindly, but with his eyes open to the reality of the sinfulness and brokenness of Saul.

I am well aware of the sinfulness and brokenness of humanity.

I am also aware of my own sinfulness and brokenness.

But somebody else took a chance on me.

And God asks me again and again, to take a chance on others and trust anyway.

God challenges me to have faith like a child and trust that all of creation really is God's playground.

A playground filled with potential friends -- fellow beloved children of God on this journey of life together.

And that by taking a risk and offering friendship I could be a part of helping them discover that God loves them and has a purpose for their lives.

And, who knows, they might just turn out to be the friend that I needed to help me remember that I am also loved and that my life has purpose too.

Who do we see reaching through the fence in hopes of finding a friend?

Whom is God challenging us to offer unmerited trust to?

Whom is God calling you and me to be a brother or sister to?

Children's Message:

Brace yourselves kids, because what I'm about to tell you is the absolute hardest thing about being a Christian.

This is harder than getting up early in the summer to go to church.
Harder than waiting till after church to eat cookies.
harder than sitting still for a whole hour.

Are you ready?

God asks us to be nice to people who aren't always nice to us.

Do you know any bullies?
Kids at your school who just aren't nice?

Yeah. We're expected to be nice to them.

I know! It's hard!

But here's the thing.

What happens when people are nice to you. It's nice, right? So you're nice back.

God is asking us to "go first" at being nice.
To be a friend *to* people before they are friendly to us.
Then maybe they will start to see that we could be their friend.
Maybe they could try being nice too.

Being nice is part of how God invites us to participate in making the world a better place.
So that's your homework for this week! Go first at being nice. It's not easy, but it will change the world!

God, help us to go first, at being nice, in Jesus' name, Amen.