

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C  
1 Kings 17:17-24  
Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11, 12, 13  
Galatians 1:11-14A, 15AC, 16A, 17, 19  
Luke 7:11-17  
June 5, 2016  
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Alice McDermott's novel, *Charming Billy* (1998), is set amidst a tightly knit, working-class, Irish-American community in New York. The novel opens with the wake of its title character, Billy Lynch, who was a charismatic, self-destructive alcoholic. The people who care about Billy have gathered, after his funeral, in a small bar and grill in the Bronx. The gathering has a particular purpose. His friends and family have come together to weave what they know of Billy into a narrative. They are trying to turn his life into a *story* – a story endowed with coherence and purpose. McDermott writes that they have set out to redeem “the affection they had felt for him, once torn apart by his willfulness, his indifference, making something worthwhile of it, something that had been well spent after all.” The story they are making takes shape gradually, incorporating new impressions as they arise. For example, when it occurs to some of them for the first time that Billy's widow Maeve possesses a kind of courageous beauty, that new insight needs to be woven into the story. In McDermott's words, “her courage, or her beauty, however they chose to refer to it, became something new, in turn, of what they might say about Billy's life. Because if she was beautiful, then the story of his life, or the story they would begin to re-create for him this afternoon, would have to take another turn.” The story they are making might be

thought of as a gift to Billy, but it is primarily something that they themselves need. In the wake of the chaotic waste that characterized much of Billy's life, the story will provide his friends with needed reassurance that their *own* lives, and human life in general, are meaningful. The objective *truth* of the story they are creating is less important than its capacity to sustain hope.

We continually compose narratives of our own lives in a similar way. Decades ago, when I was a student hospital chaplain, my supervisor said to me, "Charlie, for you everything has to have a happy ending doesn't it?" I found the comment disconcerting at the time, but in retrospect, I don't think it says anything remarkable about me. I think just about everyone feels a need to see their lives in the context of a story that is going somewhere – that makes some kind of sense. And again, the truth of these stories can be less important than their utility in this regard. The thing is, once we have adopted a story as our own, we start to believe it. We come to accept it as the one and only true story of who we are and what our life means. The biggest potential problem with this tendency is that sometimes our stories prove toxic. I'm unforgivable. I'm useless. I'm unlovable. I'm a big fat failure. Once these stories take hold, they can be terribly difficult to root out. We accept them as the unalterable gospel truth about ourselves. And of course *gospel truth* is the one thing that they certainly are *not*.

We can see the birth of such a toxic story in our first reading. The son of a widow dies during a visit to her home by the prophet Elijah. So much is fact. The poisonous story the widow weaves out of these facts can be seen in her lament to Elijah: "Why have you done this to me, O man of God? Have you come to me to call attention to my guilt and to

kill my son?” In the event, Elijah is able to destroy this interpretation of the facts before it can take root, by restoring her son to life.

In our second reading we learn that by the grace of God, even a poisonous narrative that is well established can be overturned. St. Paul describes to the Galatians the man he used to be: “For you heard of my former way of life in Jerusalem, how I persecuted the Church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race.” There you have Paul’s old life in a nutshell. He saw himself as a man of faith engaged in a spiritual competition with his contemporaries. The way to score points in the contest was to inflict ever increasing violence on those he saw as heretics. That was the story of his life – the narrative that gave his existence meaning and purpose. Of course, Paul’s story would eventually change profoundly, but he wants the Galatians to understand that his story didn’t change because he himself found a better one. He writes, “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Our Gospel, conversely, records the birth of a true story. It shows us the genesis of a narrative that is both purposeful and profoundly true. Jesus restores life to the dead son of the widow of Nain. That much is fact. Now notice how the crowd interprets what has happened. Because they know their scripture, Jesus’ action reminds them immediately of Elijah’s previous raising to life of a widow’s son. Elijah was a great prophet, therefore, they reason, Jesus too must be a great prophet. “Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, crying out ‘A great prophet

has arisen in our midst,' and 'God has visited his people.'" And that, of course, is true.

The upshot is this: You live your life in the context of a story you tell yourself about yourself. Your story makes it possible to live. It gets you through your day. Over time, you've become convinced that your story is not only useful, but true. You imagine that it is the *only* possible interpretation of your experience. The problem is that, in all likelihood, your story contains toxic elements that impoverish the life it is meant to sustain. The good news offered by our reading in this regard is twofold. First, it is possible to exchange your story for a better one. There are other, more life-giving ways to interpret your experience. Psychological therapy, for instance, when it is successful, enables people to exchange their old stories for new ones that have more utility. Secondly, and more profoundly, faith affords us the opportunity to embrace a new life story that is more than useful. It is *true*. You are a beloved child of God who has the opportunity by your every action to participate in the saving work of Jesus Christ. You're forgiven. You're useful. You're loved. And you probably aren't as fat as you think you are.