

In What We Trust

Jeremiah 17: 5-11

Luke 6: 17-26

All around us is the proclamation “In God we trust.” In the last Florida Legislative session, the majority passed a bill that required every school in Florida to prominently display the words “In God we trust” at the entranceway to the school. It seems there is a belief that this civil religious expression is somehow necessary and beneficial. Many schools have opted simply to display the seal of Florida on which the words are prominently presented. I don’t know if this will satisfy legislators, so don’t be surprised if they pass a new law that requires certain new conditions. Again, the purpose as well as the tangible result of this micro-management remains up in the air.

Certainly, the fascination with this element of civil religion – the invocation of God by a nation that has no professed religion by constitutional design – is curious. How do we as a nation or as a society conduct ourselves as having placed our trust in God? Is it because people go to church? That’s unlikely since best estimates say that only about 25% of the population attends religious services on a regular basis. Is it because the first European immigrants were often religiously devout and professed their dependence upon their God? Perhaps, but the first settlement at Jamestown was populated not by the faithful, but by greedy speculators who dug the earth in futile pursuit of gold and neglected to plant crops for food, nearly bringing about their extinction as they awaited a supply ship from Europe for their salvation. Besides, that is all centuries-old history and is difficult to relate to today’s society.

If one were to objectively cite the top two or three things in which our society trusts, God isn’t any of them. What those top three trust items would be is debatable, but I would say money, power, and technology. Money is easily the most cherished and trusted item; the words “In God we trust” is written right on it – how ironic! Power is evident in many ways, like our defense budget. Among the top ten military spenders in the world, the USA is not only number one, but spends more than all the other nine national military budgets *combined*. Technology is seen widely as the source of salvation whether in medicine, energy, agriculture, you name it – tech is the answer. And God? Well, God is not even close to being that which we truly trust as a nation or a society. But it is a nifty expression to toss around and to prominently display, even if it is quite inaccurate. It’s the sentiment that counts, not the substance?

For people of faith, it is supposed to be different. It should be obvious that we live different lives from all those who don’t trust in God or have faith in God. Maybe that’s true, but each individual should consider that for themselves. Is our faith then **not** in money, power, or technology, but number one is God?

Jeremiah conveys the word of God to God’s people. God is judging where their trust truly lies. The passage begins: *Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord*. Already we are provided with the key factor – the true direction and orientation of the **heart** reflects the what is truly trusted. We immediately recall the words of Jesus: *For where your*

treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt 6: 21; Luke 12:34) It's the same kind of thinking.

The one who trusts in mortal, worldly promises is going to get burned, says the Lord in Jeremiah. When troubles come, they will come for you and you will find yourself powerless and disconnected from blessing. But the one who trusts in God will be blessed and prosper and be carefree amid the difficulties and deprivations that others face.

The text goes on to explain how God searches the heart and examines the mind which suggests an indifference to the things people say or the things people do. God knows as no other knows in what we trust. And God promises consequences.

The passage concludes: *Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay are those who gain riches by unjust means. When their lives are half gone, their riches will desert them, and in the end, they will prove to be fools.* While the mere possession of riches is not condemned, it seems to be assumed by that such riches cannot be gained by anything other than “unjust means.”

We might be tempted to think that riches can be obtained by other than unjust means, but that comes from looking through worldly eyes, not through God's eyes. We who are rich by worldly standards – all of us – would desperately like that qualification that our riches are gained by just means, for example by the just venues of market and compensation. But market and compensation don't actually cover the full range of God's concerns.

Worldly justice is designed to satisfy the requirements of the world, whatever those requirements may be at the time, and whatever is regarded as just in the world's eyes at the time. It is no mistake that worldly justice is designed by those with worldly power, and intrinsic to justice system's design is the maintenance, continuation, and even unfettered expansion of that worldly power. That is the way it has always been. That is the way it was in biblical times and that is the way it is today. A bank that literally steals billions from its customers and, when caught, pays a fine that is a minor fraction of its quarterly profits. But an 18 year-old who steals something worth more than \$300 in Florida can get charged with a felony and end up in prison for a few years, and suffer the social and economic consequences for the rest of their life. Both measures of justice are how the world – our society – measures justice; it is not how God measures justice.

To get a better grip on that 'God perspective,' we turn to Luke's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, the sermon *less* well-known than the Sermon on the Mount. Superficially, they bear some similarities, particularly using the language of blessing as in “Blessed are (whoever).” The two sermons are quite different upon closer examination. Without going into details, let it suffice to say that Matthew has a particular community setting, circumstances, and viewpoint about the Kingdom that Luke does not. Luke's Sermon on the Plain may be closer to the text of the source that both Matthew and Luke used since it is more free-wheeling and less deliberate than Matthew's version.

What both sermons share in common is Jesus talking about the Kingdom. In Matthew, the Beatitudes are focused on what constitutes discipleship to Kingdom values. In Luke's opening, Jesus' focus is much broader and more general, portraying broad groups of people as blessed in Kingdom terms or being contrary to Kingdom terms. This is quite simply, *Blessed are the poor* followed later by *Woe to the rich*, for example.

Each of these blessings are followed by noting the Kingdom reward, as in: *Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*. Unlike the rich who are evidently blessed in worldly terms, the Kingdom inverts or reverses the blessing of the world. In Kingdom terms, the poor are blessed and gain the Kingdom, entering the place of blessing with their God.

In the inversion or reversal of values between the world and the Kingdom, *Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort*. In other words, you-rich folks have taken care of yourselves quite nicely, but you didn't take care of those who needed your help.

The same parallel continues, those who hunger will be satisfied in the Kingdom while those who are well-fed will hunger from outside the Kingdom, and those who weep now will laugh, and those who laugh now will mourn and weep.

There are some seemingly minor breaks in the parallel language. The expression "well-fed" refers to the gluttony and over-consumption of the rich, while in the Kingdom, the poor will be simply "satisfied" which is all that the poor really want. Besides weeping, notice how the word "mourn" gets added to the consequences for the rich, breaking the parallelism. The rich will not only weep, but also "mourn" because their sinfulness has excluded them from the Kingdom. (Actually, even "weeping" in the rich-phrase is different from the poor-phrase, being more like "lament" or "grieve" rather than "weeping, again referring to the exclusion from the Kingdom because of sinfulness.)

Finally, how one is regarded in worldly versus Kingdom terms gets paralleled. Those who are scorned, excluded, and reviled as evil in worldly terms are the poor, hungry, homeless, and imprisoned, the useless widows, orphans, and other beggars, and the outcasts, aliens, and other different, unacceptable people, in particular those who serve the way of the Son of Man. If that's your status with the world, then Jesus says: *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets*. However, if the world celebrates and honors and respects you, then there is unlikely a place for you in the Kingdom, in particular the religious righteous because the world celebrates, honors, and respects the **false** prophets.

The issue of 'in what we trust' matters. Jesus' sermon in Luke as Jesus explains that 'God perspective' by contrasting worldly standards and values with God's Kingdom standards and values. In Luke, they are diametrically opposed, and intentionally so. Any

preacher who tries to muddy the very clear waters is nothing more than an apologist for the acceptance worldly values instead of the demanding and challenging reversal of valuation by Kingdom values. In short, it ain't nothing that Jesus would say.

Jesus and the prophets like Jeremiah who came long before him are teaching about the alternative value system that God has for the world. Those who trust in the promises and values and beliefs of the world can expect their reward from the world. As we've seen, those who reap those worldly rewards are unlikely to fare too well in Kingdom terms according to Jesus and Jeremiah. Having put their faith and trust in the world by accumulating wealth and coveting power, then God's way, Jesus's way, didn't really count for anything. The Kingdom was not worth striving for. There was little serious thought given to setting aside worldly ambitions and its cherished gains. That clarifies what was trusted, not God or Jesus or the Kingdom.

In what we trust is typically **not** God, despite our proud civil religious claims. No, the co-opting of such a phrase is only helpful to justify worldly claims, exploiting the claims of faith to support the worldly agenda.

Jesus does tell every disciple what the path of the Kingdom is, the way of peace, justice, and righteousness. And if few will preach it, you be assured that it is because few want to hear it. To trust in God is to embrace Jesus as Lord and his Kingdom as the bearer of our promise of new life. But how badly do people really want that?