

A Worthy, Lasting Trust

Hosea 11: 1-11

Luke 12: 13-21

Trust is the critical glue that holds our human society together. When we say that ‘things are falling apart,’ we implicitly mean that the critical glue of trust has been failing, what should bind us together in equity and mutuality is no longer present. There is no sense that equity is possible. There is no sense that mutuality is possible. There is no sense of trust that anything is possible. That eliminates the possibilities of the future. That leads to despair that problems will never be addressed, only exploited cynically to score points. Hope dries up as the glue of trust dries out. When despair reigns supreme and overshadows hope, there is no hiding the ugliness, the darkness, the fear.

Imagine your relationships without trust. Would you even have relationships without trust? What quality could those relationships possibly hold? For inmates in prison, the basic rule is to trust no one. Information is power, and anything and everything can be used against someone whether it is for advantage, leverage, or exploitation. It is a lousy state in which to exist. I met one inmate who had never told anyone about the brutal death of his daughter for the ten years in prison since he learned of the tragedy. He trusted no one, did not believe that he could make himself vulnerable for even a moment. Keeping it bottled up within himself, the pain, anger, and grief literally ate away at his spirit. He became a kind of zombie who went through the motions, uncaring and unmoved, simply looking forward to his release in a few years so that he could hide out, away from anyone, until he died. Now that we have been talking through some of this, he is starting to become engaged with life with a bit more purpose and interest.

Normally, relationships are a strength for us. Who- or whatever we are *alone* gets multiplied when a functional relationship brings another into our life. When those relationships multiply, the strength of relationships generates the strength of community and even nation. Trust is the primary ingredient in making all relationships into strengths. You don’t even have to particularly like or agree with someone, but you *can* trust them nonetheless and be in relationship with them and make things happen in working together. In our society, we have done everything we can think of to undermine and devalue the fabric of trust, expecting relationships to continue. In fact, we know that there is estrangement and hostility, and the more hostile, angry and estranged we become, the weaker we make each other, our community, and our nation.

Like the inmate who I mentioned, the intractability of the estranged relationships in our nation makes us witnesses and participants in the anger, pain, sadness, and even grief eating away at our common spirit. We are becoming a zombie nation. In the zombie nation, each one looks after themselves and is perfectly okay with consuming their neighbor, particularly if that person is someone noticeably different from them. We don’t eat the other zombies, at least not until we get really hungry.

How do we come back from being the zombie nation? I don’t know. One thing is certain. Unless folks can embrace progressively greater degrees of trust that we share a common journey, we won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

As people of faith, we're instructed to trust God in our covenant relationship. That is what having faith is all about. Few biblical figures model that faith, and most give witness to the extraordinary difficulty of being so faithful, so trusting. Abraham is heralded as the one who followed God faithfully and went where he was commanded and did what he was told. But he was exceptional. Most of us struggle with faithfulness like the average Joes and Janes of scripture. We see that on display in today's scripture readings.

In the reading from the prophet Hosea, we are in a different mode from the previous, possibly more familiar analogy. In the first analogy at the start of the prophecy, Hosea is instructed by God to marry Gomer, the town tramp. Both God and Hosea know that Gomer is unfaithful, she is promiscuous, and she will be making whoopee whenever a male with a handful of shekels comes along, regardless of the promises of fidelity in her covenant relationship.

This marriage is an obvious analogy of the awful relationship of God with God's people, Israel. Israel is unfaithful to God in the same way that Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea. Whenever Israel sees something better, and feels like compromising the fidelity of their relationship with God in pursuit of other gods, for whatever reason, Israel always jumps in the sack. Israel's promiscuity is maddening but God persists in trying to bring this insatiable harlot back to the place where Israel can truly be loved, be cared for and be secure. While desiring such reconciliation, hope for it occurring seems far off as Israel refuses to repent and stay faithful to the Lord. There is no evident effort on Israel's part to re-establish trust.

Today's reading in Hosea offers a different analogy. We hear how God treated Israel as a child, teaching the little one to walk, feeding Israel when hungry, healing Israel when falling and scraping their knees, loving them and embracing them. The question of trust in the relationship continues to be in question, only the type of relationship has changed from husband-wife to parent-child.

But in Israel's time of need, to whom do they turn? Not to the parental God of their covenant, but to faith in the politics of Egypt and Assyria. These two kingdoms – one to the west and the other to the east – are striving for control of the valuable Middle East trade routes. Little child Israel in its fear has not sought the way of the parent God, but has made alliances instead with one, or the other, or both of the menacing giants, Egypt and Assyria. Israel believes that its security can best be obtained by playing them off one another, trusting that they can play the political game to a successful outcome. Israel's kings make alliances through marriage, and introduce worship of other gods. Israel's kings pay bribes to these kingdoms to keep them from invading.

The choice for security for Israel was to trust in its own cleverness, its own deal-making, grasping rather desperately for its very existence, sure that appeasing one or the other kingdom would somehow preserve its tenuous hold over its self-determination. The prophet warned how they would face destruction, graphically

portraying the undoing of their dangerous gambles, and detailing the severe price the little child nation would pay.

Yet here God is the gracious Father, not unlike the father in the parable of the prodigal son. God cannot bear the thought of completely losing his beloved child, no matter how foolish and hurtful that child has been. Still, while God's anger has stopped short of Israel's complete destruction, there is no mistaking God's harsh resentment for the sinful and unjust actions this child nation-state. Love, justice, and righteousness have been lost in Israel, key elements of their covenant. Hosea ends his prophecy with a final call for Israel to repent of its sins and turn faithfully to trust in the way of the Lord.

Israel should know that God is its true security, the object of its basic trust. The prophet tries to remind them and God continues to prod and reprimand them. But they placed their trust in their own designs, and they would pay a very dear price.

We find a similar circumstance in the parable of the rich fool from Luke. This section begins with a request from the crowd demanding that Jesus decide the division of an inheritance. Jesus refuses to answer. Jesus is not about to become involved; he can detect the triangulation. That's a term used in group conflict dynamics. Triangulation seeks to bring in an unrelated third party as the authority on one side to force the other to comply to demands. It's quite common, and Jesus is wise to the maneuver.

But it provides an opportunity for Jesus to refocus attention on what is **truly important**. While the offended brother in the inheritance dispute may have been trusting in this windfall to provide for his well-being, Jesus suggests that he ought to be considering other things first.

Speaking of windfalls, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man whose harvest produced a windfall of additional wealth. Faced with this substantial addition to his wealth, he ponders what to do with it. He decides that he'll tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store his newfound success. Ah, the rich man is very pleased with himself and foresees a future of "tak[ing] life easy; eat, drink and be merry." However, the rug gets pulled out from under his prospective life of luxury when his life is taken that very night.

Let's remember that the subject of this parable is *already* a rich man. We don't know **how** rich he is, but let's say for certain that he does not have the cares in this life of his neighbors. He's got everything he needs at the very least, and plenty more. One could definitely say that he has already been generously blessed.

Having that secure standing in life, his reaction to the windfall harvest is not one of gratitude or compassion or righteousness. None of those things enters his mind, not for a moment. His concern is how to maximize this windfall gain for his own benefit. Not content with his existing wealth, and having now been blessed with even more wealth, his sole focus is on securing his blessed enrichment all for himself. This, he believes, will put his life on easy street and he will have all that he wants for the rest of his life. He simply doesn't realize how short that 'time of his life' will be.

I call attention to the phrase in vs. 20: *But God said to him, 'You fool! **This very night your life will be demanded from you.**'* The Greek text doesn't say that. Curiously, it uses a third person plural verb. In Greek, it reads: *'You fool! This very night **they demand** your soul from you.'* Why does the English translation omit "they?" Who is "they?" The story has no other character besides the rich man. The only conceivable "they" is his goods, his possessions, his wealth. His possessions are demanding his soul! Will he yield his soul or not? Has he already given up his soul? All of his trust has been placed in his possessions; now will they complete their takeover of his life and take his soul away, too? Such fascinating questions! (This whole line of thought comes from the work of Jonathon Stufft, Pastoral Intern at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Mansfield, Ohio who picked up on that odd verb in vs. 20 and all of the juicy implications. Great find!)

Jesus is teaching his listeners, most of whom are not likely rich in earthly possessions, that life is not about the accumulation of *any* earthly possessions of any kind. Rather, life's promise is realized in activity that embraces and advances the good news of God's justice, righteousness, and promise of new life. The good news does not involve taking care of **oneself**. If anything, it means that you are *already* taken care of. You are made secure by your trust and faithfulness to God and God's way. Do you truly believe that? Or do your possessions demand your soul, too?

In the ways of the world, the rich man's reaction to his windfall of additional wealth describes aptly how wealth and possessions are regarded, the spoils of success. However, by the values of the Kingdom of God, Jesus teaches that those same assets are to be regarded as tools in the work of justice, peace and healing.

By our faith and trust in God, and by our attentive pursuit of those Kingdom values which Jesus pursued, we give witness to our trust in all ways in the power and grace of our loving God. We turn from being forever needy into eternally grateful; inheritors not of possessions, but of life itself.