

February 15, 2004/Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

David L. Edwards

Who Can We Trust?

Jeremiah 17:5-10 *Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water....*

Luke 6:17-26 *'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.'*

*[The Master] never expects results; thus he is never disappointed.
He is never disappointed; thus his spirit never grows old. --Tao te Ching*

*The more we become willing to depend upon a Higher Power,
the more independent we actually are. --As Bill Sees It*

God's words through Jeremiah are straightforward: To trust human beings is to experience life as a curse; to trust in God is to experience life as a blessing. Or simply: Don't trust people; trust God. Jesus' words in Luke's gospel are just as straightforward: Those who have little or nothing by way of the world's goods or status or the kind of happiness that is built on shallow things are blessed, whether they know it or not; those who "have it all," whether wealth or power or the happiness built on their good circumstances, are cursed, whether they know it or not. These passages parallel each other, pointing to the same truth.

Jeremiah's ministry took place when Judah was trying to make itself a nation among nations. Under King Josiah, Judah was seeking to become a player among its neighbors. Robert Davidson writes in his commentary on Jeremiah that the prophet was preaching "an attack on those within the community who believed that Judah could only survive by successfully playing the game of power politics." [Jeremiah: Volume 1, p. 140] Josiah's death in battle (609 BCE) came a tremendous shock. "For Judah," writes Davidson, "nationalism, however much it claimed the blessing of religion, was not enough." The people had placed their trust in the wrong places—national pride, military power, political clout. "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength," said God through Jeremiah. The same message is sounded throughout the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures. In Hosea we read, for instance: "Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people and all your fortresses shall be destroyed." (10:13-14)

Don't trust people! What sense can we make of that? Isn't trust a noble human virtue? We work hard to be trustworthy and to build trust with others. We suffer when trust is broken or betrayed. Persons we thought we knew and counted on to be honest, fair, and reliable suddenly show us another side—betrayal, dishonesty, the breaking of a commitment. So we become disillusioned, hurt and angry. In response, we withdraw in self-protection—I won't trust anyone again!—or we try to find the will and strength to rebuild the relationship.

Jeremiah's words declare something fundamentally wrong with the way we usually approach life. The problem is that we trust people in the first place. We look to others—friends, family, fellow Christians, political leaders, institutions—to fulfill our great expectations of life. We simply want more from people than they can deliver. Then we hitch our happiness to those expectations. No wonder that when others don't live up to our expectations, when they no longer fit the image we've constructed in our minds, we believe they have failed us and our happiness is shattered.

Even persons we've lifted to saintly status will never fit our expectations or match our image of them. There have been those who had a profound impact on my life, who for one reason or another became known to me in a more troubling light. They weren't the persons I imagined them to be, the persons I wanted them to be. I felt betrayed, even foolish, to have put so much trust in this or that person. I have also had experiences of disappointing others' expressed or hidden expectations of me. Through it all I have begun to understand that we are not made to bear the kind of trust we want to put in one another. If we are always looking to other people to fulfill us in some way, then we are doomed to chronic disappointment.

Who or what CAN we trust? Before answering that question, we need to know how this word "trust" is used in scripture. It is very close to the word "faith," and may, in fact, mean the same thing. To trust means to turn one's whole being in a particular direction, toward something or someone. Trust is the fundamental orientation of our lives. The image of the sunflower comes to my mind. As the earth moves beneath the sun, the sunflower always keeps its broad and bright face toward the source of its life. Trust is our capacity to turn toward the source of our lives. For Jeremiah and the whole of the biblical story, that source is God who made, sustains, and guides us.

So trust has a very particular meaning in scripture. It is used only for our relationship with God. Where do we look for meaning and purpose, for our true identity and our deepest strength? If we put this kind of ultimate trust in other people, we are looking in the wrong place. We can't expect others to give us what we can only receive from God. Having healthy and high expectations for one another is a good thing. Building relationships of mutual responsibility and cooperation for common goals is a good thing. But ultimate trust is for God alone.

This is why working seriously with our spiritual lives is of critical importance. The practice of daily prayer, meditation, and study of scripture is part of Covenant Membership in this church, and, I hope, of each of our lives to some degree. It is not a pious exercise or simply the meeting of a religious requirement. It is precisely our work of learning what it means to trust in God, of growing in our capacity to draw our very life from God. And as we do this, we then grow in our capacity to relate to others in a truly loving and compassionate way. Laying all our expectations on others is not loving and compassionate. Demanding that others fulfill what we think they should be or do is not loving others. It is a part of our desire to control life, to have others and the world the way we want. It is a recipe for disaster whether in personal relationships or among peoples and nations.

To grow in trusting God we have to let people go. To truly love people and the world we have to grow in trusting God. Then we can stop wasting our energy, time, and efforts trying to change others and do the thing that unleashes the power we do have to change life—live our own lives out of our relationship with God.

I love the images packed into Jeremiah's words. Contemplating these images can teach us what it means to trust God and not people. To place our trust in people, circumstances, and structures is to become like a dried out shrub in the desert. We can't even recognize relief when it comes, says Jeremiah. Have we not known or been those who have become cynical, embittered, or disillusioned to the point that they or we can't even recognize beauty, goodness, or new life that are all around us? How often do we complain about all that is wrong with other people, the world, or ourselves? How much effort do we spend becoming aware of all that is right and good? This is not being in denial. It is not trying to see the world through rose-colored glasses. It is seeing life as it is, a mixture of good and evil, strength and weakness, beauty and ugliness. If we are trying to draw our strength, sense of purpose or identity from other people, seeking their approval, love, or perfection, then we will experience constant disappointment. When this happens, don't we feel ourselves drying up inside like that desert shrub?

If, however, we are working at our own relationship with God, deepening and growing in it, another image arises--a tree planted near a flowing stream. Its roots draw water all the time from the source of their life. When burning heat comes, threatening drought, the tree is so deeply rooted that it doesn't fear the heat, as Jeremiah puts it. When we are working faithfully at our spiritual lives, at our inward journeys, a fundamental shift occurs. The things that once caused us so much trouble and fear lose their grip on us. The things we once thought were so important to our lives—money, power, prestige, having more than we need—become unimportant. Our lives become so rich and full of the reality of our relationship with God that we find ourselves letting go of people and what we previously demanded from them. We are freed to truly love people as they are.

Paul Henderson and I recently attended a “boundaries training” workshop at Natural Bridge. It is required of us to maintain our clergy standing with the Disciples of Christ. The training is a response to the sexual boundaries problems that can and do arise with ministers and those to whom they minister. Sexual misconduct is not a problem only in the Catholic Church! The session had to do with just what I am talking about today. Often those in helping professions get themselves and others in trouble when they are not taking care of their own needs, when they drift, without realizing it, into expecting something from those who come to them for help. We watched videotapes of spiritual leaders and teachers from different traditions speaking to the subject of healthy boundaries. I very impressed with a statement by an American Zen Buddhist teacher. She said that spiritual teachers must want nothing from their students. This is taking our hands completely off of those we desire to help. What if we applied that to our relationships with one another and all people? As those seeking to grow in our capacity to draw our life from God, to be on that inward journey of intimacy with God, shouldn't we also want nothing from others? This is truly loving people and freeing them so that they, too, find their connectedness with God, with life itself. We don't help people find strength by becoming their strength. We don't help people find their true identities by tying them to ourselves. We help most by being as rooted as we can be in God. Then we can be truly helpful, strengthening, and loving companions to others as they seek what they need to find for themselves.

This explains a mysterious phenomenon I've experienced over the years of my ministry. Most often we are of greatest help to others when we are not TRYING to be helpful but are living our own lives as faithfully and trustingly as we can. Kaye received an e-mail this week from a friend in the congregation I served in Indiana. She shared the news of a young woman who was going to receive a very important college scholarship. For the scholarship competition the young woman had written an essay. In it she spoke of the person who had been the greatest influence on her in the direction of community service. She described the minister who had baptized her, “a quiet, simple man who loved to write and sing folk songs and play his guitar. He and his wife lived by example, going to Africa and teaching me that it is a far better thing to serve other people—not only your own town but your country and your world.” I don't share this to impress you about me. I do admit to my tears as Kaye read these words to me. The point is that I didn't set out to affect this youngster's life or change her in some direction. I had no idea that she gained anything from me. These are the things that happen because we try as best we can to live as close to God as we can. They happen when we trust in God, when we live as faithfully as we can out of our relationship to the God who made us uniquely gifted and called people. It is not our work, but God's work through us.

Don't put your trust in human beings, says Isaiah. Put your trust, your life in God. Then you will be truly of use to this world. Then you will be able love others and seek their good in the right ways. Then you won't be taken in by all the things that pretend to offer life but can't deliver. Then you will know life as a blessing.