

“Trust”

Matthew 6:25-33

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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University Baptist Church

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The Grab Bag topic for this Sunday is “Trust After the Pandemic”. Of course, we are dealing with two pandemics: COVID 19 and its 2021 variants; and systemic racism. It will likely take us longer to get on the other side of the first one than the second one.

So, assuming the questioner is talking about COVID, let’s think of the things we used to trust and don’t trust so much anymore.

News.

Elected officials.

Churches.

Accepted truth.

Facts.

Alternative facts.

Our own eyes, ears and minds.

Come to think of it, this works for systemic racism too.

We don’t trust:

History books.

Scholars

Critical race theory.

Text books.

Facebook.

Twitter.

The dude next door who is sure he has figured out the conspiracy.

Where do we find truth? How can we trust that the truth is real? Are we still seeking truth, or do we throw up our hands and say, trust no one?

Our dollar bills say we trust in God. But do we?

Do statements telling us to trust God sound like empty platitudes?

“Trust and obey for there’s no better way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.”

That makes a nice Sunday School song, but is it that easy?

Psalm 46 repeats three times, “God is our refuge and strength in times of trouble”. When plague hits, when leaders topple, God alone is worthy of trust.

I saw in a psych ward a formula that said, “trust = behavior + time”. In other words trust is earned, not blindly given.

One of the things that the pandemic has given us is anxiety. We’re anxious about what behavior is acceptable. We’re anxious about another’s behavior which may or may not be safe. And then we can’t trust that person again. Or at least they need to prove their trustworthiness by behavior plus time.

I imagine that the people listening to the sermon on the mount had some anxiety. But it wasn’t only anxiety of an interpersonal sort. People had some real anxiety about making ends meet. They may have been told by their landlords or the Romans to trust them, and they did until they proved untrustworthy. Would this preacher also prove untrustworthy?

In Jesus' day, half of the people died before the age of 2. Most adults didn't live past 40. On top of this there were taxes to the Roman occupying army, tithes to the priests, field rentals, let alone caring for sick family members. It is to these people that Jesus directs his word today. To these people Jesus says, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat, drink or about your body and what you will wear. Your life is more than food, and your body more than clothing." We're no good if we worry too much.

We don't worry, but then what? We're still hungry and thirsty and naked. That's where the community of faith comes in. Remember that the last parable Jesus told was about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. "When did we see you sick or naked or in prison or hungry or a stranger?" Jesus answered 'whenever you did it unto the least of these you did it unto me.' This is the call to take care of one another. Trust in this vision of community for this is what will save lives. Invest in that program.

Trust that God will convict the people of faith to do something about abject poverty, or global warming, or systemic racism. And we are to be the behavior over time that builds trust.

We spent the better part of the past year hearing the constant from Scripture "Fear Not". We focused on it in our worship services precisely because there was so much to fear. The word came to us over and over again that God has a plan. Trust in God.

You see, the world is counting on our fear. They are counting on our anxiety. They are counting on our immobility. But there is a power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity and it's driving us that way if we pay close enough attention. Jesus' admonition to not worry is counter-cultural. It's subversive. It's remembering who God is.

The Bible says "Fear Not" over 300 times. Today's scripture says "worry not." That's what the Gentiles do, the nations, the Goyim. He is saying be better than that.

But here's the rub. We are Gentiles, the nation, the Goyim. We are well practiced in worry, mistrust and fear.

When we get lost in that anxiety, Jesus tells us to take a break.

We are told to consider the lilies. I have spent the better part of the past week considering lilies. The lilies lovingly planted by UBCers over the years have grown so much that they have choked out other plants. It's time for them to find new homes. It's time to find room for new plants. It will be soon time to water them and train them to look for and expect water that will hopefully come in the form of rain in the months and years to come. These lilies have seen people come and go, with narry a worry in the world. As we transplant some of them to our home gardens, we carry on this legacy, their watchfulness. They are trusting us to care for them as they cared for us. They give not only beauty to our world, but pollen for insects and nitrogen for soil. They are a part of our ecosystem.

I think one of the problems that we have is that we trust too much in the wrong things. We want the easy answer. That's why we spend so much time on these devices. We want to listen to the ones we trust, or who at least show up on our feed the most often and reinforce our own belief system. But what if the point is to embrace mystery? What if the point is to recognize diversity and variety and wonder and awe. That's the stuff of God.

Alice walker famously wrote, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."

The point of this point in Jesus' sermon seems to be that there is something that is more important than creature comforts. The accumulation of wealth is not what it's about. Any fool can get stuff. But seek first the kingdom of God and it's righteousness. If you do that, then

everything will follow. Not necessarily cars and boats and airplanes, but purpose and direction and compassion and mercy and maybe a trust in the one who can set you free.

If we put our trust in wealth or its accumulation, we will have good years and bad years. And we will always be chasing elusive wealth. But if we focus on God, we may or may not get wealthy. The difference is, that when we fail or circumstance or disease rears their ugly heads, there is something to fall back on that does not fail. There is a creative presence in God that conspires to find community amidst chaos, hope amidst hardship, and companionship amidst exclusion. That's some good news.

There's a variation on an old joke. A person eschews handwashing, masks, distancing and even the vaccines because they believe God will save them. Then they die of COVID. When they get to the pearly gates, they say to St. Peter, I don't understand, I'm a person of faith. Why didn't you heal me. St. Peter said, we sent you antibacterial soap, facemasks, encouragement to keep a safe distance from others, and even a vaccine. My question to you is, what are you doing here?

There is so much to distrust.

So, here's what I trust.

I trust that most people are good in their hearts. When convincingly confronted with evidence, they will make the right decisions. But before they can do that, they need to shatter their old world-view. In a sense they need to give up that which they have trusted.

Think of white supremacy. Many people see it as people in hoods saying the N word. They don't see it as systemic and generational advantages given one race over another. What is so threatening about critical race theory is that it seeks to undermine the narrative that too many of us grew up with. It seeks to distrust those systems of control that run our world. And in its place is something that has only had glimpses of success. It's as if Paul was talking about our world that we see through a glass darkly.

We saw it on 38th and Chicago this past year. People hearing each other's pain. People creating art. People gathering to pray. People giving out food and water and clothing and money and security to a people who had been left out. As one community lost trust, another stepped up.

On Tuesday morning, I went to a prayer vigil at the Basilica where we considered the mobile sculpture angels unawares. Its name comes from the book of Hebrews where it says do not withhold hospitality from strangers, for you may be attending to angels unawares. In it is depicted dozens of people on a boat. Old, young, black, white, devout Jews, women covered in shawls, children holding stuffed animals. All are on a boat. All are fleeing homelands that are no longer safe from them. Where they trust that if they stay they will die, so they sail off in hope that they might find haven and harbor on a foreign shore. Imagine the trust they put in strangers. The calculus that comes from not knowing the future, and imagining that the unknown is better than the life left behind.

My friends, trust in the ones who have proven themselves over time.

Trust in something that is eternal, not fleeting.

Trust in the goodness of humanity in spite of numerous examples of sinful behavior.

Trust that there is wisdom and courage and compassion abounding that can help you move out of your permafunk.

Trust that you are not alone, that someone has your back. That's what Jesus was saying and that's what we are saying too.

We say it not by what we proclaim, but by what we do:
the way we help each other out.

The way we hear each other's griefs.
The way we imagine a better world and take steps in that direction.
So when you are feeling down and in despair, find yourself in a sea of lilies and imagine
God is there with you, maybe singing an old tune:

(singing)

*Be still, my soul: for God is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change God faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best eternal friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*