

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Roots of Trust”

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Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—

who can understand it?

I the LORD test the mind
and search the heart,

to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

A couple of weeks ago, as I was making my white-knuckle drive over snowy and icy roads returning Maren to Ball State University, I was listening to National Public Radio. I happened to catch their Friday afternoon science show. I am not a big science guy but I found this particular show interesting because the guest was not speaking about stars or galaxies or microbes or physics. He was psychologist Stephen Greenspan, a teacher at the University of Connecticut, who was introducing his book on the science of gullibility. Who knew that gullibility was a science? It seems that Dr. Greenspan is an expert as to how and why people are swindled, fooled, cajoled, and taken advantage of. What was most fascinating to me was that during the interview, Dr. Greenspan confided that he himself had recently been a victim of the alleged \$50 billion Ponzi scheme of financier Bernard Madoff. The expert on gullibility was in fact gullible enough to lose hundreds of thousands dollars by trusting in the wrong man at the wrong time. Greenspan offered some advice on trust, when to trust and who to trust. He concluded by saying trust is never a textbook case and that every circumstance of trust is different. But given his personal history, I wasn't certain if I could even trust him!

I read an article this week from the Money section of the MSN website. Editor-in-chief Richard Jenkins was writing about the tremendous responsibility and burden he feels having to collect and edit financial advice in a time of deep economic distress. Jenkins wrote, "With the amazing stupidity, venality and old-fashioned greed that we've seen from Wall Street and from the rest of the financial industry, any rational person would have to be asking, 'Am I really supposed to entrust my hard-earned savings to these bozos?'" Jenkins then offered a checklist to review before investing any money or listening to anyone's advice on investing money. Trust, he reminds all of us, is not something to be given lightly anymore.

This morning's sermon attempts to address a topic suggested by Vicki Gaines. Vicki purchased the selection of a sermon topic at our church auction last November and we thank her for her generous contribution. If I understand her correctly, Vicki's concern is one that many of us have. We have grown older. We have embraced and in some cases tackled life's responsibilities. We have worked hard to build our families and achieve some sort of personal success. We have established deep relationships with others who share our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods and our community. We have developed what we hold as reasonable assumptions about the place of faith in our lives. In other words, we have built something with our life and in our life. We have accomplished much of what we dreamed about when we were young and dreamed about "growing up."

Yet deep within us there is uneasiness about whether or not we have made it. Like the ancient teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes we wonder if it shall all last. When is it time to rest and be satisfied what we have been given, or do we need to continually worry, plan and labor? We worry if we can ever relax and enjoy the ride of life or if in such enjoyment we will watch everything slip away. Can we trust in the goodness of God that has provided in the past? Can we trust that God will continue to provide into an uncertain future? After all, it is a question of trust. Especially in times like these, we might wonder if we can truly trust in God's presence and live freely and thankfully in the confidence of that grace.

The Scripture lessons from Psalm 1 and from the prophet Jeremiah contain wisdom for us about where we might search for the beginning of trust. The Psalmist speaks of those who find their delight in the law of the Lord as trees planted by streams of water, water which contributes to their health, nourishment, and prosperity. The Psalmist also speaks of the wicked, those who find their lives dried up and withered, and become like chaff which is eventually blown away by the force of the wind.

Jeremiah delivers a similar image. Those who trust in the Lord are like trees planted by the water, sending out their roots so that they are strong even through the heat of a summer's drought. They are the blades of grass by the sprinkler heads, green and growing in the midst of an August drought. Jeremiah writes that those whose hearts turn away from the Lord are like plants in the parched places of the wilderness, seeing death and nothingness when the promised rains do not come. Here I think of the shrubs that grew near the moon-like surface of the salt flats of Utah. They were sparse, small, harsh and brittle. They were the very symbol of death.

Jeremiah was writing about our human condition and our human questions. We want to be happy. We try to build our happiness and security through our education, our work, our family, and our labor. We think that if we can find a way to eliminate life's disappointments and hurts and have plenty of money in the bank, we will always be able to do exactly what we want to make us happy. Yet when left to our own desires, even when we manage to meet most of them, it doesn't seem to make us happy, leave us content or comfortable. Jeremiah says that those who trust in mere mortals, those who trust only in the human heart, are like the shrubs of the desert. But those who place their trust in the Lord live like trees whose roots are watered and nourished so that even in times of drought, they continue to bear fruit in all places of life.

God wants us to be a healthy plant. God wants us to have deep roots and strong branches. God wants us to develop our roots with trust, not in the things we create, but with trust in a relationship with the divine, the source of all good things. Trust in God means we sink our roots in God's instruction, seeking God daily in study and prayer and reflection. Trust in God is means being

ourselves, only the creature that God wants us to be, not the picture of success painted by our culture. Trust in God helps us to see situations in life as blessings and opportunities rather than an endless series of complications.

The opposite of trust is fear, and there is much of that going around these days. Fear causes us to withdraw, to become obsessed with ourselves instead of others, to stop taking risks, to anxiously build to control an outcome, to be concerned about winning, success, and self-reliance. Fear may move us, it may get things done, but fear is born with shallow roots that do not last through the tempests of life. Fear does not bring hope, only worry that divides us from others and keep us from whom God wants us to be.

At the summer camp sponsored by the church I previously served in Salt Lake City, there was a tradition that occurred on the counselors' night, before the rest of the campers arrived. New counselors had to participate in a "trust fall." They climbed a small ladder set in the back of a pickup, folded their arms close to their chest, straightened their waist and knees, and then fell backwards into the waiting arms of the rest of the camp staff. Of course as minister, I was required to do this every year. Sometimes it was quite frightening, standing at the top of that ladder and contemplating the issues and personalities of the young people who I was trusting to catch me. It wasn't fun. I would rather have not had to do it. But each year I climbed that ladder and fell backwards in trust. For me it was a symbol, a symbol that showed the young people that I did trust in their skills and decisions as counselors. And it was symbol of the kind of trust we need in faith, an ability to let ourselves fall without seeing, to fall into the gentle but strong arms of a caring God.

I recall as if it were yesterday, the efforts to get my daughters to ride a two wheel bike. As soon as we took those "training wheels" off, the fun really began. They would climb up on the seat and begin to pedal, and all would go well as long as I was holding onto the back of their seat, supporting their balance as I ran down the street. But then as children are apt to do, they begin to worry too much about when I might let go of the seat and leave them all alone to balance themselves as they pedaled. They would look back instead of ahead pleading, "Hold on Daddy, don't let go! Don't let me fall!" They worried so much about me letting go that they forgot to pedal, forgot to steer, and consequently never got anywhere. They could not trust therefore they could not hope therefore they spent their bike riding efforts pedaling in vain.

Jeremiah urges us to trust in God's promises as they come to each of us as God's children. To be blessed by God does not mean that there won't be any storms. There will be storms and some of them may seem almost too much to bear. Jeremiah teaches that the blessings of God cannot be reduced to material benefits. We may not be able to measure the benefits of such trust. We cannot measure peace of heart or strength of soul.

Trust in God is built from the roots, from a deep and abiding relationship with God. Truly and honestly seek God's intention in your life. Remain open, keeping in touch with God's instruction daily. Worship God, acknowledging the gifts of life gratefully as blessing rather than anxiously as trouble. Let the ever-flowing stream of the Spirit nourish your most inner most being.