

Learning to Trust

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
February 27, 2011 Peace United Church of Christ

Well after those scripture lessons, what shall I say to you? Don't worry, be happy?

Here's a little song I wrote, you might wanna learn it note for note;

Don't worry. Be happy....

The landlord says the rent is late, he may have to litigate. Don't worry. Be happy.

No. I'm not going to tell you not to worry and be happy; especially not now; especially not in this economy. Besides, Jesus is not telling poor people who can't make their rent to be happy-go-lucky. For example, Jesus mentions clothing because then like now, clothing was a sign of social rank. So Eugene Peterson accurately translates the essence of this verse when he says that those living a God-life don't worry about whether their wardrobe is in fashion.

But folks, Jesus isn't speaking in Jerusalem during fashion week. He's at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. If you've never been there before, there's not a lot there. The Sea of Galilee is literally the lowest place on the planet with fresh water. Jesus is talking to the bottom of the barrel. You can't get any lower, geographically or socially, than fishermen and subsistence farmers at the Sea of Galilee. Of all people, they would be the last to worry about fashionable wardrobes.

But please remember, in that day and age, those who had fancy clothing were believed to be blessed by God. So when Jesus questions whether those individuals were living for God He's turning common beliefs on their head. But this time, the crowd is liking it. "Consider the lilies of the field and how they grow - even Solomon doesn't have a robe as fine as these little flowers." Folks, Solomon wouldn't have been a popular person in Galilee. Yeah Solomon had lots of riches and robes and concubines and he got it all through heavy taxation. South Carolina was not the first place to secede from a country. When Solomon died, Galilee withdrew from the monarchy and joined the northern kingdom. So when Jesus says that neither Solomon nor the ten best dressed men and women compare to wildflowers, the Galileans are smirking, laughing & nodding in agreement. Jesus is talking about THOSE people.

But then he talks to them. "But if God so clothes the grasses of the field, how much more does God love you people of little trust." YOU people of LITTLE TRUST. Ouch. I don't know about you, but that's the part that crawls under my skin and stays there.

Let me be honest. To say your interim pastor has some issues in the trust department is a bit of an understatement. For example, Mandy and I have had... issues with parsonages. At one church, Mandy came out of the shower to find the church property chair in the house. When we put a stop to his behavior the church wouldn't even let us fix the furnace in the house. Seriously. Did I mention it was upstate New York in the winter? On another occasion somebody let all of our animals outside. We've had our trash stolen; a truck load of rocks dumped in our front yard. And did I mention the time a member threatened to kill me? Yeah. You see I had this really radical notion that the consistory should make decisions, not just one or two families in the church.

Throw into that mix some other stories, a rare orthopedic disease and a younger brother who died and it's safe to say your interim pastor is both scarred and a wee bit suspicious .

But, in case you think I use preaching in lieu of therapy, I seriously doubt I'm the only one who has some trouble trusting. They're certainly having trouble trusting in New Zealand today. We begin each day assuming the ground beneath our feet will remain still. So what happens when it doesn't? And then there's the Mid-East and north Africa. The only thing moving faster than the price of gas in the Triad is the spread of Arab protests and unrest. Why? It's fairly simple: the youth don't trust the powers-that-be. Well, actually, they do trust them. They trust them to keep taking bribes; they trust them to keep the same families in power forever & ever amen; they trust them to keep taking and taking; they trust them to keep ignoring the needs of the great masses of common people.

But you don't have to go to Africa, the middle east or New Zealand to find people with trust issues. How about Wisconsin or any of the states where there are on-going protests over the benefits, rights & responsibilities of public workers. What fuels the tea party mentality? The answer is a complete lack of trust in government and the public sector. Why did unions and public workers fight and fight hard to get collective bargaining? Because they didn't & don't trust the powers-that-be not to screw them.

And then there's the church. If you don't think the church has some trust issues then I have a bridge I'd like to sell you. There is a lot of uncertain ground beneath our feet today. There are more people in this country who say they have no religious preference than there are mainstream protestants: Methodist, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians & the UCC. Most of our churches do not trust that tomorrow will be better than the 1950's. And so they cling all the tighter to the ways & means of yesteryear, which, ironically, usually serves only to bring the end in quicker fashion.

Any developmental psychologist will tell you security is a psychic necessity. And depending our personalities, culture and specific stage of psychological development, we find security in different ways and from different sources. Children find it from their parents; teenagers find it amidst their particular tribe; adults frequently look to wealth, while nations look to the military-industrial complex. The need for security is universal. So too is the experience of getting burned.

As I was leaving the first church I served, I was visiting my therapist. I said something rather naive to her that perhaps I wouldn't get burned at my next church. She looked at me as if I had three heads. She said, Jim, of course you're going to get burned. We inevitably hurt the people closest to us. We hurt our spouses and our kids and our families. Why do you think even for a moment that we wouldn't hurt those people that we only sit next to on Sunday? Touche.

So in an uncertain world full of threats Jesus is speaking a word of peace: "I know the world isn't trustworthy, I know the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune hurt, but I want you to trust me and to have faith in my love for you." Please note: Jesus does not promise that everything will be honk-dory if you will do this. He does not preach a prosperity gospel that will bless us with money if we but pray the right way. He doesn't promise we'll never have to rely on the generosity of others. He doesn't even promise the world will stop shaking.

I have a buddy in Virginia and a few years ago his wife had an aneurism. Long story made short, she lived when she shouldn't have. When Mark got the news, one of the church members with him said with much relief, "God was with you today Mark." Mark

didn't miss a beat: No! If Heather had died, God would have been with me as well. When it comes to this sermon on the mount, we struggle with it on at least two levels.

- 1) There seems to be a popular misconception that if God is with us then our wives won't die and we won't have problems. Obviously those who believe this have never read Job, or Jeremiah, or Ecclesiastes, or Lamentations, or any of a number of different books.
- 2) When we live in a perpetual state of anxiety, we are not capable of seeing beauty and grace. We, our state, our nation, our churches, our western culture is living in a perpetual state of stress and anxiety. We can no longer see beauty and grace on any regular basis.

We believe our perspective is the only perspective. We, perhaps even unconsciously, believe that we can see all things and that all things rotate around us. But that is illusionary & delusionary. Most of the world has done without most of the things we take for granted in the western world. But instead of recognizing the fortune we were born into, we drink Maalox & curse last week's 2% drop in the DOW. So in whom or in what do we find our security? Our selves, our stocks, our ability to pick ourselves up, or in our God?

The ranch in Colorado where I was speaking had a pool heated to about 101 degrees by hot springs. So each night many of us would hop in and relax amidst the stars and snow. One particular night the conversation got very heavy. We spoke of the number of churches in the Rocky Mountain Conference who had experienced... troubles or who were now without pastors. We talked about changing demographics and the effects such changes would have on the church. We talked of our children who wanted nothing to do with the church. One of the pastors said that this was truly a time when everything was changing. I commented that he sounded hopeful not scared. He said, "Of course I am hopeful. I am very hopeful." Folks, he wasn't naive, or indifferent or unconscious or callous or any of the things I see and hear from so many people. He wasn't separated from reality. Rather he was awake and aware, and yet, he was hopeful. Why? Because he trusts. He has faith that there is more going on than meets the eye. He knows he can't see everything going from his perspective, and that in the end God loves us and knows of our deepest needs. What mother in her right mind **wouldn't** respond to their children's deepest needs?

So why am I here at Peace? I'm not sure. I needed a job. I was going stir-crazy staying at home after my surgeries this fall. And, I guess because, while I have my issues with the church, I keep finding myself drawn to these things called pulpits. Maybe I'm here because I have a gifts to help you in this interim period as you engage in the process of finding a pastor to lead you in the next stages of your journey. Maybe I'm here because you have some of the balm I need to heal from some of my wounds. I don't really know. All I know is that this last year has been one long lesson in trusting that the God of the cosmos is active in our lives and strives for our welfare despite evidence to the contrary. Maybe, as long as I'm here, we can learn about trust together.

So I say to you, do not worry about what you will eat or drink or wear, or even whom Your next pastor will be or when he or she will arrive for non-believers and anxious churches strive for those things. But strive first for the kingdom of God; strive first for righteousness; strive first for right relationships with others; strive first for that which matters. Just whatever you do, don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Amen.