

"Who Do You Trust?"

At the end of last year the Pew Research organization asked Americans which profession they trusted the least. The top 10 (or should we say the bottom 10) were:

- (10) Judges
- (9) Clergy – that's a bit distressing!
- (8) Nursing Home Operators – influenced by the COVID experience no doubt
- (7) Bankers
- (6) Journalists – I thought they'd be closer to number 1!
- (5) Lawyers – surprise!
- (4) Business executives
- (3) Advertising practitioners, and tied for least trusted:
 - (1) Car salespeople and Members of Congress - only 1% rated these last two very high for honesty and ethical standards.

This was a random survey of about 1,000 people, so maybe it's not totally accurate. Hopefully, clergy aren't that mistrusted (although it's not surprising, given all the clergy scandals, and our culture's growing mistrust of Christians and organized religion). Lawyers and car salespersons always seem to be on the list of people not trusted! Members of Congress, politicians – we could have guessed that result!

This is a time when there is widespread mistrust in our society. The COVID pandemic has spawned mistrust of so called medical experts. Political parties accuse each other of lying and cover ups galore.

It's against this backdrop that we turn to the Scripture passages for today's message. It is Psalm 118:8-9 "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes." The psalmist says it's better to trust in the Lord, to take refuge in the Lord, than to trust in humans, or to trust in princes (leaders).

I know of at least one person who believed that! It was the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament. "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" (Jeremiah 17:5-8).

Cursed are those who trust in humans – people! Wow. That's strong language. You're *cursed* if you trust people! Come on! Don't we need to trust people if we're to have stable human relationships? A civilized society? Imagine a workplace, a classroom, a neighborhood, a church where nobody trusted anyone else in the group?

Not being able to trust people can be a sign of poor mental health. For instance, a person who is

paranoid, or has Paranoid Personality Disorder, will be suspicious and untrusting of everyone and everything. That's not a good thing! People who have a problem trusting others are often people who've been deeply hurt, or have had abandonment issues, often as a child. The psalmist, and Jeremiah, tell us: Don't put your trust in people! Why would they say that?

Let's look at Jeremiah, and the context for why he might have said what he did. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry spanned some 40 years, when the southern kingdom of Judah was caught in the middle of power struggles involving some of the mighty empires of the time: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia. Jeremiah saw Judah – God's people – as having forsaken their covenant with God. He spoke out against their sin, and their dependence on flimsy alliances with these nations to keep them safe. He urged them to repent and turn back to God, to *put their trust in God!* But they wouldn't listen. They attacked him for his message. And eventually Judah was defeated by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., and many of its people were sent into exile.

So you see why Jeremiah said what he did? *The people of Judah needed to ultimately trust God, not humans, for their safety and their future.*

So what's the message for us today? *First of all, developing trust in one another is good, and necessary, if we're to have healthy human relationships and a stable, harmonious society.* You want to be able to trust your spouse, or your kids, or your parents. You want to have a circle of friends whom you can trust, right? We want to work for a boss we can trust, or to be able to trust our employees. We want to trust the garage where we get our car repaired, the store where we buy groceries. We really would like to live in a country where we can trust our local and state officials, and our elected leaders in Washington.

By the way, I hope we ourselves are striving to be a *trustworthy* person.

But here's the reality: *There's a limit to how much we can trust people.* We've all had situations where we've trusted someone, and that person has violated our trust. We shared something in confidence, and the person didn't keep it private; someone was nice to our face, but behind our back, criticized us or put us down; someone we looked up to (a teacher, a pastor, a leader), we found out they have feet of clay; a person said, "I got your back" – but didn't hold to that promise to stand up for us. In one church I served we had a situation that needed to be addressed. It was a touchy thing, and taking action could split the congregation. One of the church leaders said to me, "Whatever you decide, I'll support you." So, we took action...and...where was my friend! Now, he wasn't a bad person. I loved him as a brother in Christ. But, he just kind of left me hanging. Haven't we all done something like that? People trusted us, and we failed them.

Jeremiah reminds us why there are limits on how much people can be trusted. Jeremiah writes: "Cursed are those who trust in *mere mortals* and make *mere flesh their strength*"(Jeremiah 17:5). *We're weak. We're finite. We're flawed human beings.* Our President, Senators, House of Representative members, are no different than us. They catch colds and get the flu, and get in bad moods, just like us. They make mistakes. They can be stubborn. They cling to their biases.

Also, Jeremiah understood that we're sinners. He says, Don't put your trust in mere humans, "whose hearts turn away from the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:6). Later, in verse 9, he says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" Now I believe most people are fairly trustworthy. But even the most reliable of us are sinful. We operate out of self-interest. We often don't respond to people in the way that's best for them.

So, yes, we need to trust one another. But there's a limit to how much people can be trusted. If you're smart, you'll keep that in mind. You don't share your intimate secrets with someone who's a blabbermouth! You don't naively assume that when the car sales person says, "That's the best I can do" that he or she is being truthful. You don't believe everything a politician promises! *Once again, the Bible presents a realistic and accurate appraisal of human nature!*

Jesus Himself placed limits on trusting Himself to people: "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone" (John 2:23-25). Notice, Jesus was cautious in trusting Himself to everyone, because He knew human nature, and what's in people!

But the main point, the bottom line, of my message today is this: *We can safely put our trust in God.* Jeremiah says, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:7). The Hebrew word "trust" means "to lean on", to "be confident". You lean on the Lord like you'd lean on a cane or a walker to help you walk. It's like sitting in a chair, where you put all your weight down on that chair believing it will support your body. *Who do we lean on ultimately? Who are we most confident of?*

When we trust God and lean on God what can happen? One thing that happens is *we find strength and nourishment.* The Scripture says of those who trust in God: "They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream" (Verse 8a). It's like a tree, whose roots absorb the water of a nearby stream. That's contrasted to those who trust just in people, who are "a shrub in the desert" (verse 6). When we put our weight on God we can tap into the limitless resources of God and find strength and nourishment for the most difficult of times.

We can also overcome fear. Jeremiah 17, verse 8 (speaking of this tree planted by the water) says, "It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green."

Sometimes we have to face scary things in life. Some young scouts from the city went on a camping trip. The mosquitos were so fierce they had to hide under their blankets to avoid being bitten. One of them saw some lightning bugs and said to one of his friends, "We might as well give up. They're coming after us with flashlights." Sometimes it seems like the bugs and annoyances of life are coming at us and hunting us down with their flashlights. Trouble comes at us, and where do we turn? Whom do we trust? We can trust in certain people to help get us through. And that's OK. But when we trust God, God can take away our fears and anxiety as no one else can!

Then too, *trusting in God can make us fruitful and productive*. "In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8c). There is a Peanuts cartoon, where Charlie Brown is at the beach carefully building a castle in the sand. He's standing back, admiring his work, when suddenly it starts to rain, and the downpour levels his castle. Standing in front of the flat sand where his sand creation had been, he says, "There must be a lesson here, but I don't know what it is."

We feel that way a lot of times when things go wrong, don't we? There must be a lesson in this, but I don't know what it is. We can trust in *ourselves*, or our *human* resources, to somehow "grin and bear it", to "make the best of it", to "try to make sense of it all". But we can also trust in the Lord to use our difficult times for His purposes and for our growth and development.

For those who trust in God, God has a way of bringing good out of evil...gain out of loss...growth out of conflict." With God, even in the pain there can be gain! We've probably heard of airlines offering a Frequent Flyer program (free flights for accumulated air mileage). Some years ago a flight was hijacked and flown 4 times between Algeria and Beirut. The wife of one of the hostages, after the ordeal was over, asked the airline if those trips qualified for Frequent Flyer mileage. Well, *they did!* When we trust God, God can use our pain for gain!

The prophet Jeremiah, living in a difficult time in the history of Judah, came to realize that those who trust only in other people come up short, but those who trust in God are blessed. This Scripture from Jeremiah came alive for me a number of years ago, and I preached a sermon on this text. I had been the pastor of a church for a number of years, and was beginning to sense that it was time for me to move on. I felt that I was no longer providing the leadership that church needed. Then I learned that behind my back, a number of people in the congregation had passed around a petition to get me out of there. I was stunned, hurt, and angry. My trust in people was shaken. And this text reminded me that ultimately, I needed to trust in God. The next few years were difficult and disruptive for my family and me. But God got us through, and looking back, I see how God brought good out of that painful situation.

"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:7). I heard the testimony of an elderly man who spent almost his whole life devoted to the work of the Lord. He shared how early on he went through a period of doubt when he and his wife lost their baby. But he said his father told him, "Son, it's always safe to trust the Lord."

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
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