

February 13, 2022

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 17



George MacDonald said in a quote I shared a couple of months back, “To be trusted is a higher compliment than being loved.” What I think he means is something like this. We are all beloved children of God. God loves us. God loves you, and God loves me, and we can know this love through the love of a parent, the love of a teacher or coach, the love of a spouse, or a friend, or a child, or a pet. Love is the basic and bedrock, you might even say, right of each human being created in image of God. To be someone in whom others can trust is another matter.

Love is something bestowed; trust is something earned. Worked at; a lifelong project of chipping away at falsehood, a long and faithful effort at building a life of integrity, of becoming a person of character, worthy of trust. We come to church, I think, for these two experiences. To hear, and receive, and feed on the love that is God; and even if we don’t believe in God, to see other people who mediate a love and touch and presence that speaks of his possibility. But we also come to church, or log onto church, for the more elusive reason: our hearts are set on finding a place or a person or a presence big enough to hold our trust. That is what I want for each one of you. That you know you are loved, and that you know that there is One big enough to hold your trust.

Addie is really the inspiration here. You’ll know that the first need or longing of a baby is to know that the world can be trusted. And that Mommy and Daddy can carry their trust. She opens her eyes onto the world – I’m happy to report blue eyes – and wants to know that the world is safe and trustworthy. You could say it’s the most elemental quality of what it means to be human. The prophet Jeremiah would agree, for in this morning’s passage he suggests that our lives are a something of a holy pilgrimage, and what we carry along the journey with us, that which is most precious and most vied for, is our trust. In what do we place our trust? What we trust in says a lot about us. And yet, I can’t help but notice how we find ourselves living in a land of distrust.

I read an article in Axios this week that said: “A majority of people – over 60% - globally believe journalists, government leaders and business executives are “purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations.” We know all about distrust of leaders, distrust of the economy,

distrust of science and vaccines, distrust of neighbor, distrust especially of our unenlightened neighbor. You could say that our country is suffering from a pandemic of distrust.

Jeremiah speaks and preaches in the 7th century BC, in the midst of his country's impending collapse, at a time, just on the verge of exile, where Israel is living in their own desert of distrust. The prophet is remembered as the weeping prophet. Not a favorable way to be remembered if you ask me. "Yea, Jeremiah, you remember him, he's the one that cries all the time." But Jeremiah had reason to. We know from his book that his life was a tough one. Over the years, he was beaten for his message, and was put in the stocks. He was threatened by the mob in Jeremiah 26 and threatened and ridiculed by the king just 10 chapters later. Adding insult to injury, he was deserted by his family, who didn't just abandon him but plotted to kill him. They didn't like what he was doing to the family name.

"Cursed are those," he writes this morning, "who trust in mortals." You can imagine the prophet muttering those words to himself, for he has tasted the curse of broken trust. And this little sermon he preaches to Judah in Ch.17, it almost allows them to overhear this conversation within his own heart: my people, my soul, have you found a place big enough to hold your heart's trust?

But there's one problem, one challenge, one obstacle that might get in your way. The challenge is not your family, or your job, or an illness, or someone you disagree with. The one thing you've got to wrestle with is your own wild and confused heart. The heart, he says, is or "deceitful" above all things.

Now what could he possibly mean in saying this? Our own hearts deceitful – I thought my heart was the one thing I could and should trust. When all else fails you've got to go with your heart, our well-meaning advisors told us. You scholars of Hebrew will know that the word for deceitful here is the word from which comes the name Jacob. Recall Jacob back in the book of Genesis, the younger brother of Esau who tricked his father Isaac to steal the family blessing. Jacob dressed up like his brother – he even put on goatskins to mimic his hairy sibling. All to win the affection of his father. The heart will go to extraordinary lengths to secure

a blessing. And, Jeremiah is saying, “the heart is Jacobean.” It plays dress up, it wears masks, often it is more concerned with appearing good, than actually being good.

In the opening of his great book *The Calling of Character*, David Brooks draws the distinction between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the ways we want to appear on paper – endlessly capable, multi-talented, varied and sophisticated experiences with massive wealth accruing potential. Eulogy virtues are the virtues you want to be remembered by when you are gone. Courage, patience, tenderness, faithfulness, trustworthiness. Not the person you presented on paper, but the person at the core of your being. Do you trust who the world tries to sell you on being; or do you trust who God is calling you to become? Resume virtues often become about conceit; eulogy virtues are about calling and character. We live a culture that nurtures the former; we have hearts that long for the latter. In this way, our hearts are torn, prone to deceive us. The blessed life, what Jeremiah wants for each of us, involves an appropriate acknowledgement of the Jacob that lives inside each of us.

But, notice: Jeremiah doesn’t leave us contemplating our own deceit. Like any good preacher worth their salt, he brings his hearers attention back to God, the God before whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid. He says that God knows the heart; God sees our mind and our thoughts; and then he says that God rewards the actions of the faithful, according to the fruit of their deeds. This doesn’t seem like good news to a lot of people. It doesn’t to me. Reward me based on my actions; can I choose the day and the hour that is judged? How can God reward anyone when every heart is like Jacob’s?

Well, just because all we see when we look within is Jacob doesn’t mean that’s all there is inside us.

After all, read this passage as Christians, as those who have been baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His life and obedience to God the Father, his perfect love poured out, is now in us. His life is ours, and our life is his. Our deceitful heart he takes, and we receive his heart that trusts

the Father. When we look in the mirror, we see deceit, and we understandably distrust ourselves. But God sees more than we see. When God looks at us, he sees Christ. We are invited to trust his vision of who we are.

I remember talking to a young woman about her time in a 12-step group. This woman was in her early 20's and had already lived a hard life, and she told me about the group she was attending. About the people there meeting in the basement of a church. People broken and wounded like her. People who had donned all sorts of outfits, trusted in all sorts of substances, but were now getting real. This group, she said, was beginning to give her her life back. She said something I'll never forget: "I'm around people these days who see more compassionately than I see me, and I am slowly beginning to look within with their eyes."

When I think about what it means to trust God, for me, it is all about trusting the way God sees me and sees the world. Like a baby looking up at her parents learning to trust their vision and their care. And allowing the divine vision to transform the way I see the world. What would it mean to acknowledge deception, to acknowledge our own divided hearts, but then to more deeply acknowledge Christ whose life we've been baptized into? This frees us up in so many ways. We are now free not to be perfect, or the hero of our own stories. We are free to pursue those high virtues. We are free not to have to escape all the contradictions of being human.

I should tell you that this sermon came to me in the car this past week as I got out of the house and was driving down Rt. 2, and I was listening to one of the services at the Monastery. My heart was being carried away as the brothers were chanting the Psalm; I could just feel myself in that special space. But before the psalm ended, I realized that I was stuck, and had been stuck, behind two cars that were driving at such a frustratingly slow speed and I couldn't get around either of them. These 2 cars, you wouldn't believe it, were going the speed limit, and on Rt 2 that is unconscionable.

Realizing I was being held back, I lost every ounce of equilibrium I had built up, and I had less than Christian thoughts in my head

and on my face, which I made sure they saw. I am at once a sinner and a saint. Jacob and Christ alive in me, and most days it takes all the trust I can muster to believe that Christ is my deeper identity. And it takes all my trust to believe that too about my neighbor. They too bear the complexity of what it means to be human and are worthy of much more than my distrust.

How do we trust God in 2022? By fighting back against this culture of distrust we live in; by trying to be people of character and integrity; by filling ourselves with truth and goodness and beauty. How do we trust God in 2022? By believing that we live in God's world. That Christ is the root of all things, and of all people. His is the life of every life, his love the heart and soul of every heart and soul.

You might not think this is a big enough solution, not a hearty enough solution to beat back this pandemic of distrust we find ourselves in. This is where real, gritty trust kicks in, and action, and prayer. I pray God continue to move in every heart. I pray that character becomes more compelling than conceit. I pray people learn to see who Christ is for them and in them. I pray that the people each of us encounter this week might be tempted towards the epiphany my friend had in her 12-step group. Imagine if just one person came to our church over the next year and left saying, "I was around people there who saw me more compassionately than I see me, and I want to learn more about what it means to see life through their God's eyes."