



“Living the Faith: Trust God”

Luke 12:22-31

May 12, 2019

Perhaps you have heard this modern-day take on the beatitudes of Jesus: “Blessed are the pessimists, for they will never be disappointed.” Something akin to this cynical view seems to have become a creed in the contemporary world. Everywhere we turn there are warnings against expecting too much, getting our hopes too high, trusting anyone too completely. We live in an era of distrust and suspicion, and with good reason. All around us, there are examples of infidelity, mismanagement, deceit, and scandal. Institutions and professions that were once assumed to beacons of ethical responsibility are no longer immune from this sweeping skepticism. In December, the Gallup organization conducted their annual poll asking Americans how they would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in different fields. I was disappointed but frankly not surprised to learn that members of the clergy received the ratings of “very high or high” by only 37% of respondents, an all-time low. Members of Congress received high ratings from a paltry 8%.¹ And it is not just “people out there” in whom we have lost trust. We also live in the age of prenuptial agreements and private investigators. Studies show that we have less trust in our neighbors, teachers, colleagues, and family members. We have made distrust a kind of virtue.

The story is told of a father who one day calls his ten-year-old son in for a lesson. He has the child stand on a chair with his back to his father, then tells him to close his eyes and fall backward, promising to catch him. The young son is hesitant at first, but since it is his father, he eventually does as he is told. As soon as the boy closes his eyes and plunges backward his father steps out of the way, allowing his son to come crashing to the ground. Bruised and confused, the son struggles to his feet, glaring at his father through teary eyes, “But why? Why?” The father replies, “Sorry, son, but the most important lesson you have to learn in this life is that you can’t trust anyone, not even your father.” The story is difficult to hear but the underlying message is delivered in subtle ways each day of our lives.

If following Jesus, living the faith is an act of trust, then lives dominated by fear and distrust work against the grain of our faith. And yet, worry seems to most often gain the upper hand. I don’t know about you but I am capable of worrying about almost anything. I worry about the future of the world,

and I worry that our milk is fast approaching its expiration date with still more than half a jug unused. And, at 3:00 in the morning, any worry is magnified in intensity.

In this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks to his disciples, these twelve friends who have left everything behind in order to follow him. He speaks to them of the crippling impact of worry and the trustworthy providence of God. In the passage immediately preceding this one, Jesus tells the painful parable of a man whose life was dominated by worry about the future and an obsession with acquisition. The man tears down his barns and storehouses to build even larger ones, hoping that the larger barns will enable him to rest from ceaseless worry. But before he can complete the barns, the man dies. Plenty of possessions stored up for a future that no longer exists. All that worry and nothing to show for it, not even an hour added to the span of his life.

Just after telling this story, with its tragic ending still lingering in their minds, Jesus turns to his friends and says, “*therefore*, do not worry about your life.” Jesus links the parable with these instructions because he knows instinctively that beyond all our material concerns and our distrust of others lies a deeper and more profound question.

It is the question that occupies the hearts and minds of would-be disciples in Jesus’ time and ours as well. It is the question that keeps us up at night and wakes us early in the morning. I don’t know which worries and stresses and fears and anxieties you have carried into this sanctuary this morning. I don’t know which concerns weigh heaviest on your mind and which awaken you at three o’clock in the morning. I do know that you have them and that you wrestle with them daily. This is one of the few universals in human experience—we worry; we find it difficult to trust. And, at their core, each of these worries carries with it the profound question of God’s trustworthiness. Can God be trusted with a world seemingly out of control? Can God be trusted in a time defined by deep division and incivility? Can God be trusted with my own brokenness and pain? Can God be trusted with the future... with my future? Can God be trusted enough for me to release my stranglehold on power and possessions? No matter how we phrase it or which examples we use, the question is this: Can God be trusted?

In response to this piercing question, Jesus does not offer a simplistic answer or a stress management plan or a self-help book. He turns instead to the created world, offering a lesson from creation. When you are tempted to worry about what you have or don't have, when you are paralyzed by fear about what is to come, when you doubt God's continuing power in a world dominated by distrust and traumatized by tragedy, consider the birds and the flowers. Their message to us is this: God provides. God can be trusted. Do not rely on the idols of distrust and selfish stockpiling. Instead, trust that the one who provides for all of creation will also provide for you. Today's teaching from Jesus is easy to declare (or print on money and license plates) but much harder to live: trust God.

Part of what makes it so difficult is the wide chasm between the kind of trust Jesus describes here and the thin definitions of faith that are often trumpeted by over-eager preachers. First of all, the trust Jesus describes is not merely another word for optimism. Jesus does not point to an abstract assurance that everything will work out in the end. Nor is Jesus speaking of an intellectual assent to a theoretical idea. There is, then, an important distinction between trust and belief as we commonly understand it. Trust is, by definition, interpersonal. We can believe *something*. We trust *someone*. And, in order to gain our trust, that someone must have a track record of past faithfulness, a worthiness of our confidence. As a mentor of mine often says, "none of the promises of God can be proven in advance. But if you live them, they are true every time." God is deserving of our trust because God has been faithful—every promise made has been a promise kept.

There is another important distinction between the trust that Jesus describes and what we often mean with words like faith and belief. To trust is to move forward in faith. Trust is faith that has taken a step into the unknown. Trust involves letting go of our need to control and instead placing ourselves in someone else's hands. The ravens and the lilies are wholly dependent upon the faithfulness of God, and they are well fed and gloriously clothed. To trust in God is to actively lean into the conviction that you matter to God, and that God will provide for you.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am *not* saying that trust in God is a kind of magic potion that will ensure everything is going to be okay the moment you turn from worry to trust. But I *am* saying that worry is an enormous waste of precious time. I *am* saying that God is faithful and provides what we need. I *am* saying that many of our fears and anxieties are creations of our own worried minds. If I did not deeply believe that God can be trusted, I would not be standing before you today. If I did not struggle daily with this conviction, I would

not be living in the real world, and I do live in the real world; the world of disappointments and betrayals, of deceit and unkindness. In such a world, trust is never easy and trust is deeply needed. *To our confirmands—if you hear nothing else this morning (a scenario that I admit is likely), please hear this: choosing to trust even when it is difficult is an act of faith and a step toward abundant life. This morning, as you confirm your faith, you take that next step. We are proud of you and we rejoice in your commitment. As we share this journey together, we need your faith to inspire and challenge us. Never stop growing in trust, never let cynicism defeat the hope that you feel today.*

As I was thinking about how we learn to trust, a memory came to mind. A few years ago, before Samuel was born, Sara and I made a trip out west, driving through parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Ten miles outside of Taos, New Mexico, we pulled over to see the Rio Grande Gorge and the steel bridge 565 feet above it. Walking out onto the bridge and looking over the edge I nearly had a panic attack. I was frozen, my knees locked and my heart racing. With Sara walking beside me, I discovered the key to crossing the bridge. I looked straight down, only watching the next step I needed to take. One step at a time, until we reached the end of the bridge. Sometimes trusting God works that way. The space between God's faithfulness and our brokenness is bridged by trust, one small step at a time.

Jesus describes the radical trust of ravens and lilies, who live in the moment unencumbered by worry and anxiety. When I think of radical trust, there is a concrete picture in my mind. I see the wide eyes of an infant child held in the arms of a loving mother. Babies, like ravens and lilies, are blissfully free of cynicism, harbor no grudges, bear no distrust. In their eyes, I see the extraordinary power of vulnerability. They simply trust that the one who knows them most intimately and loves them most completely will provide for their every need. They depend on it daily. Think of the freedom that comes in trusting God with your life. I can't say for certain, but that might just be what it is to live in the kingdom of God. Amen.

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>