

SERMON TITLE: "Trust in the Lord"

SERMON TEXT: Proverbs 3:1-10; Psalm 22:4-5; Jeremiah 17:5-10

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INTRODUCTION

Maybe you've heard this old joke:

"How do you know you live in a small town?"

"You can dial a wrong phone number and still talk for half an hour."

If you don't understand that joke, it's because you've never lived in a small town and you're too young. But even we older people realize that times have changed a whole bunch. No longer can you dial just the last four digits, or even the last seven digits. Now, to get a phone call through to the right person, we have to dial all 10 numbers and maybe even put a 1 in front of that. Of course, none of that matters if you've already programmed the number into your contacts list. Then all you have to do is find the person's name and push the button.

But what has changed even more than how you *place* a call is how we *answer* phone calls. Instead of grabbing for the phone and answering it every time it sounds, we cautiously screen our calls by ring tones and caller ID. If we don't recognize the number or the name that comes up, then often we won't answer it at all. We figure, if they won't leave a voicemail or send a text message, then it probably wasn't important. Our default assumption is that the caller was a salesperson, someone seeking a donation, or a scam artist. If we do answer such a call by accident, then we have to maintain a super-skeptical perspective about whatever the person says. For most of us, the days of trusting that the caller is a relative or friend are long gone.

That caution learned from years of experience is what protects us from costly mistakes. But sometimes in life, we do still need to let down our guard a bit and trust other people. Whether we like it or not, we often have to rely on professionals like doctors, tax preparers, and plumbers. We all need family, friends, and neighbors who provide a caring support system that will stand by us. A congregation

certainly can and should be a trustworthy community. But—as today’s scripture readings tell us—no matter how good our human support system is, the best thing we can ever do is trust in the Lord.

1—PROVERBS 3:1-10

You might have noticed that our Call to Worship was based on Proverbs 3. The well-known verse in that passage, the way some of us memorized it in the King James Version, is “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding.” The emphasis there is on putting God first with our obedience and loyalty. We may not always understand or prefer to obey the rules God gives us, but if we do trust and obey God’s ways, God will provide us with the guidance, healing, and material resources that we need.

Proverbs 3 continues this list of benefits that come from trusting in God. Verses 21-26 indicate that, if we keep God’s sound wisdom and prudence, we’ll walk securely and not stumble. We won’t be afraid when we sit down in the daytime, and we’ll sleep well when we lie down at night. We won’t have sudden panic attacks, like the wicked do, because the Lord will be our confidence. That’s not to say that we won’t ever suffer or get hit by a storm, but our trust in God can keep us from tripping and falling spiritually.

Of course, trusting in the Lord isn’t just *relying on* God’s goodness to us. It’s also *doing* what God expects of us, which means we should be trustworthy to other people. Proverbs 3:27-30 tells us that we shouldn’t hold back good from others when we have the power to make their lives better. We should be willing to share with our neighbors and not quarrel with them. We shouldn’t be violent or cause any harm against those who trust in us. The more we behave ourselves in ways that others can trust us, the easier it will be for us to place our trust in the Lord.

This makes me think of next Sunday’s special offering for UMCOR. I hope you will come prepared to put something in those special Sunday offering envelopes. Just in the past few weeks, the United Methodist Committee on Relief has granted \$30,000 to areas in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and

Malawi that were hit by the cyclone; and \$10,000 has been granted to help with the flood problems in Nebraska and other Midwestern states. More might be needed. We who have the ability to do good for others should act in a trustworthy manner to help our brothers and sisters around the world. In so doing, we will reinforce *their* belief *and ours* that we can trust in the Lord.

2—PSALM 22:4-5

Another way we can increase our trust in the Lord is to remind ourselves regularly of God's faithfulness to other believers in the past. The scriptures are full of such stories. If we read them daily, we'll never be without a ready example of how God helped someone be stronger, braver, and healthier.

A few minutes ago, we did a unison scripture reading from Psalm 22:4-5. Those verses reminded us that our spiritual ancestors trusted in God and thus were saved. That's a great passage that we could memorize and repeat to ourselves in times of doubt and struggle. And, you know what? It's not only us who have needed that reminder of God's trustworthiness through the ages. Jesus needed it too. Jesus quoted from Psalm 22 while he was dying on the cross. The first verse of Psalm 22 is "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Hanging from that violent instrument of torture and execution, it's no wonder Jesus cried out those words of agony and frustration.

But Jesus knew more than just the first verse of this Psalm. Even though he was too weak to say so many words aloud, I'm confident that Jesus was thinking all the way to verses four and five. Those verses gave Jesus the confidence that, like his Hebrew ancestors put their trust in God and were saved, so Jesus could trust that God would take care of him. Like those earlier believers, Jesus could trust in the Lord and not be put to shame.

The Psalms were the Jewish hymnbook. Our hymns today can provide that assurance for us too. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," "Amazing Grace," and "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" all quickly come to mind. Whenever I feel stressed or uncertain, I repeat the lyrics "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. Be thou our guide, while life shall last, and our eternal home." I encourage you to

select one of your favorite hymns. Make a determined effort to memorize two or three verses. Post the lyrics on your bathroom mirror, so you can practice it while you're brushing your teeth. Repeat it over and over again to give you strength in times of hardship. Recite and sing the words of scripture and song to help you trust in the Lord.

3—JEREMIAH 17:5-10

And now, finally, we come to Jeremiah 17:5-10, which advises us to sink our roots deeply in God's life-giving water. "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make flesh their strength," says Jeremiah, for "they shall live in the parched places of the wilderness." In contrast, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, [for] they shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream . . . It shall not fear when heat comes . . . and is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." That's what we want to be like, right? The tree planted by the water, with roots that reach out to God's life-giving sustenance—so that we have no reason to fear, to be anxious, or to stop bearing fruit.

The prophet Jeremiah lived in a very anxious time. Approximately 600 years before Jesus, Jeremiah was prophesying to his fellow Jews that life as they knew it was about to end. The Babylonians were coming, he said, and soon they did. That great power destroyed the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem and hauled away all the educated and most capable citizens to a foreign land. Those who were left behind were bereft of leadership and had to figure out how to survive.

Jeremiah had a prophet's vision to see the bigger picture of what was coming, and he warned his people. Don't trust in human strength. It won't serve you well. You may think you're strong or that your allies are strong, but you'll dry up in the desert wasteland. The only way to survive difficult circumstances is to put your trust in the Lord, who can grow your roots deeply and connect you to God's eternal strength. Then, even in inevitable times of drought, your roots will be able to reach the streams of living water. You will not die. You will continue to grow and bear fruit.

Trust is a tricky issue because we've all been April fooled, misled, or betrayed at some time or other. We've all thought someone had our back, only to learn the hard way that, at best, they were frail and limited, or, at worst, they were outrightly devious. But I don't think Jeremiah meant that people shouldn't trust *anyone*. In fact, he was frustrated because more of his fellow Jews didn't trust *him* and listen to *his* advice. When they should have been listening to Jeremiah, they were listening to other so-called prophets who gave them bad counsel. The reason we have the book of Jeremiah in our Bibles today is because his proclamation was the one that turned out to be reliable and true.

CONCLUSION

Because those who claim to speak God's word hold many different perspectives, it certainly isn't easy to decipher and discern what really is coming to us from God. I think that's one of the big challenges for our United Methodist denomination right now. Very good United Methodist people have very different ideas of what God's word says. And I suppose that will always be a challenge—whether you're talking about a foreign invasion, human sexuality, or some other critical issue of the moment.

And maybe that's the point. There will always be some kind of problem, some kind of storm, some kind of drought that threatens to wither us up. So, we need to be cautious, and we need to use all the tools of discernment we have available to us. We need to make sure we're not jumping to quick and easy, short-sighted conclusions that leave our roots shallow and vulnerable. But, most of all, the best thing we can ever do is trust in the Lord.