

LEARNING HOW TO TRUST

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Sunday, October 31, 2021

"In God We Trust" is the motto on American coins. Do they? Do they trust God? Do we? Do you? How do you know whether someone trusts God? How do you know whether you do? What is the measure of our trust? And, more importantly, how do we learn to trust? How can we learn to trust more than we do?

I

The readings for today give three examples, one negative and two positive, the scribes and two widows.

First of all, we have the widow of Zarephath. She is one of the powerless of society. She has no man to bring home the bread, so to speak, and so she is destined to poverty. There is a drought, and so the widow and her son, also one of the powerless, are destined not just for poverty, but very likely for death also.

Along comes a stranger, a man not of her race, Elijah. He asks for a drink of scarce and valuable water. As she brings it to him, brazen as he is, he asks her for something more, for something to eat as well. She has little. Only enough for herself and her son. When that is done, they will await death. She has nothing left over to share. She has no extra, no abundance from which to be generous or even hospitable. She hasn't even enough for mere survival.

Elijah tells her to prepare some food for him as he has asked her, and then for herself and her son. And he says, the meal and the oil shall not fail. That is God's promise. I speak, he says, the word of God, not your God, but my God, the God of Israel. Trust God.

And she does. She trusts that what Elijah says is God's word, and she trusts God. Miracle of miracles after many days the meal and the oil are still not spent, just as God said. A miracle, but the even greater miracle was the widow's trust of God, made all the more incredible in that Elijah was not one of her people, he was travelling outside Israel, the land of his God and his God was not her God. Nonetheless, she risked everything, even her own life, but not just her life only, the life of her child as well. That was the measure of her trust. She held back nothing.

Then we have the scribes. Scribes are the religious authorities, pious and learned. They were the doctors of the law. They were important and duly honoured people. By Jesus' time, they had formed a political party of considerable influence, known as the Pharisees. They are high up in the Temple, an in-group only a notch down from priests.

But places of honour tend to attract people who are not honourable. Beware of these scribes, Jesus says, the ones who, instead of taking off the long robes they use in temple ceremonies, wear them in the street so that no one can mistake them for common people. Such people like to make sure that others hear them addressed with special salutations in order to show their superior status. They coveted the best seats in the house and the places of honour at feasts to show their rank and importance. "Stuffed shirts" is what we might call them. These kind of people make poor role models, despite their honoured positions.

But there is more. These scribes were also wolves in sheep's clothing. Power and greed had become particularly demonic in this holy setting in that those who should know better, those who had greater knowledge of God's will, and therefore had the greatest responsibility, had betrayed the trust that God and the people had put in them. Behind the facade of pomp and circumstance hid such avarice and greed that they sought to steal from poor widows. Do they trust God? No. They trust themselves, their appearance, status, power, position.

How much we brag about our faith or our status or our good deeds is no indication of how much we trust God.

The widow of Zarephath risked giving up everything. That was the measure of her trust. These particular scribes risked nothing. They had plenty and wanted everything. That was the measure of their trust. They had none.

Then came a poor widow to the Temple to put her offering to God into the Treasury. This person is not part of the in-group. Like the mother of Zarephath, she was one of the poor and powerless, a woman and a widow with no substantial means of support. Her behaviour is so humble as to be unnoticed by anyone, except Jesus, of course. Rich people are all around putting large sums in the Treasury, admirable and desirable indeed. All she has is two of the smallest denomination of coin. She puts in both of them. She holds back nothing. She risks everything.

Jesus might have chastised her for such foolishness. Not only did she put herself at risk, she was financing an institution which, he already pointed out, had those in it who took widow's money, money like hers, for their own greedy needs. Such an institution, he would soon say, would be destroyed. She was not very prudent.

Instead, Jesus points to her as a role model. She wasn't giving to an institution. She was offering everything to God. More than a role model, she is a type for Christ. This story is a prelude to passion. It points toward Jesus and the cross. What is Christ like? Look at this widow. Look at her trust. Look at her sacrifice to God. She risked out of her vulnerability and gave everything. Thus, it will be with Jesus on the cross. That is the nature of his Messiahship and that is to be the nature of our discipleship.

The measure of trust is not taken by count but by cost; not by the amount we give but by its portion; not by what we give, but by what we keep, by what we hold back; not by our money, but by the spirit behind the money and represented by the

money.

II

How then do we learn how to trust more than we do? How can we learn to stop holding some back? How can we learn to offer our whole selves to God?

For the Hebrew people it was a two-step process. Trust God, the Psalmist says in Psalm 146, and not human beings or earthly things, because God is the Creator. God alone endures. God alone is faithful. God alone can help. Trust begins with this cosmic claim that God, "who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them...keeps faith [with us] forever." Why should we trust God? Because God is the Creator and God is faithful to Creation and to God's creatures, to us.

In 1988, just after Hurricane Gilbert savaged the island of Jamaica, a Jamaican choir was in Toronto to perform. On CBC radio David Schatski asked the choir director about the effect the hurricane had on the people of Jamaica and therefore on their music. She replied that they found in that disaster a message from God which didn't alienate them from God but which brought them back to God. As the island mends itself through the health-restoring forces of nature they feel more thankful for what they have and more dependent upon and trusting of God.

The powerful image of God as Creator and Master of Creation has a profound impact on many who have felt nature's force.

Yet, though this is a good place to begin to learn trust, we can't end there. God as Creator, as powerful as that image is for some, it is weak for most of us who no longer have any significant contact with nature. Witness our wanton mistreatment of creation through pollution and the rape of non-renewable resources, and the resultant climate charge.

What makes God distinctive and attractive is not just this general cosmic claim but also our concrete memories of God's

actions in the human realm, specifically, justice and therefore the expectation of the transforming intervention of God into the concrete reality of our lives. God the Creator who keeps faith forever also "executes justice for the oppressed," the Psalmist says. God "gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoner free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the sojourners, upholds the widowed and orphaned." God inverts hopeless situations. These are our memories, not individual memories, but corporate memories, a kind of class action suit arguing that God's central business is the enhancement of the powerless against the powerful. But they also have personal importance in that God is with us, particularly in our poverty. The God who is enthroned in splendour is peculiarly allied with the poor and vulnerable who cannot help themselves. God looks favourably not on those who give plenty and have plenty left over, but blesses those who hold back nothing, even if they have little. God is with those who trust in very real and concrete ways.

Remember then the cosmic claim, but more, remember the specific, particular, peculiar, concrete transformative interactions of God with God's people. These are our motivations to begin trusting God.

III

Yet there must be more. There must be that first trusting step, that very personal act of putting our trust in God into action putting all that we are and have at God's disposal. The scribes held back and indeed sought more for themselves. But the widow of Zarephath risked her own survival and that of her son, and the widow in the Temple risked her security in giving all she had. And it was in those acts of trust that their trust developed and it is in our remembering of those acts that our trust can begin and we can risk taking the first step to trust God.

IV

For us as Christians there is even more. The widow in the Temple points beyond herself to Christ who in the ultimate act of

trust gave his very life on the cross. That trust was vindicated through the resurrection. We are an Easter people who now know as was never known before that trust is the way of God. Relinquishing control is the way of freedom. Giving everything and holding nothing back is the way of abundant life.

I heard a story once, one fitting our topic today of trust as well as leading us into the time of remembrance we will be celebrating next week. It's a story about Andy Mynarski from Winnipeg who was a mid-upper gunner, and Patrick Brophy of Port Arthur was a tail-gunner on a Lancaster bomber based in England. Andy and Patrick were best friends. Just before their 13th mission Andy found a four-leaf clover which he gave for good luck to his friend Patrick.

Hours later over France they were shot down. Patrick was caught in the rear turret unable to get out. Andy fought to free him but the flames were too great. He bailed out, but died later of burns he had incurred. Incredibly, luckily or providentially, at the last instant as the plane bellied in a cow pasture, the rear turret blew off the plane ejecting Patrick who lived. Andy Mynarski's mother was presented with her son's posthumous Victoria Cross for valour.

Whether Patrick Brophy lived because of luck or providence can be debated. But Andy Mynarski's selfless act of sacrifice goes without debate. It was an act of love. All that he had was put at God's disposal in a magnificent act of the trust of love. Nothing was held back, not even life itself.

How do we learn to trust? By remembering God and God's faithfulness, by remembering the concrete reality of God's faithfulness in the past history of our people, by remembering Christ and Christ-like disciples of all ages who held back nothing but gave everything in trust, even life itself. But most importantly by simply beginning to trust by taking that first step. Learning by doing.

Trust God. Amen.