



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“In God We Trust?”

Joshua 24:14-15; Malachi 3:8-18; Luke 18:9-14

A long time ago before TV’s had color—actually even then they had two colors, black and white—there was an afternoon TV game show on ABC called, “Who Do You Trust?” (Yes, grammatically it should have been, “Whom Do You Trust?”) I looked this up on the Internet—the first host of the show was none other than Edgar Bergen! Then came the dynamic duo of Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon! This gig launched these pals to TV fame on *The Tonight Show*. In the game, Ed McMahon would introduce pairs of players—nearly always a man and a woman chosen for their unique backgrounds. Carson spent more time interviewing the contestants than quizzing them. But in the quiz portion, Carson would tell the male contestant the category of the upcoming question; the man would then have to decide whether to answer the question himself or “trust” the woman to do so.

Now, that show finished its run at the end of 1963, but the question posed there is basic, deep, profound—and on target for today. Who DO you trust?

Erik Erikson created a theory of how people develop psychologically, from their earliest months through their senior years. He set out this theory as a set of stages people go through—well, or poorly—to progress to the next stage. Each stage has its challenges. The first—and therefore most important stage for all of us—contains these two alternatives: “Trust” or “Mistrust”. As infants, we form a deep conviction that the world can be depended upon to meet my needs—or not—based on (especially mother’s) sensitivity and provision. This stage “sets the stage” for every other developmental phase.

But later events can significantly undermine a sense of basic trust. Physical, sexual or psychological abuse results in a lack of trust about the world—or about certain kinds of people, anyway. Soldiers returning from Iraq often bring with them the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, which shows up as fear and suspicion of people and situations most of the rest of us don’t worry about. Lack of trust cripples your life and robs you of joy.

And trust is a big word in the Bible, with God—though, the word we find there is translated, “faith”. But I think it’s better to use the word “trust”, because I think “trust” gets right to your ability to put yourself in God’s hands for everything, even when you have plenty of other choices, or a long history of doing everything for yourself and depending on no one else—typical of American culture, wouldn’t you say? Yes, life can be (and is, by many) lived this way, but that kind of life is a small shadow of the richness of relationships that God designed us to enjoy. And foremost of those relationships is our relationship with God, Himself.

This is the most basic struggle of our lives—who do we trust? In the journey of the Hebrews from Egypt to the Promised Land, we touch on a variety of responses to this challenge.

When God first liberates the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, they run into a barrier at the Red Sea, and the Egyptian chariots are roaring down upon them. They cry in anguish and panic to Moses and God, and God directs Moses to lift his arms to divide the sea, so the Hebrews can go across, while the heavy chariots bog down. The returning waters drown the Egyptians. The challenge for the Hebrews had been, “Whom do you trust more—the God Who Delivered You from Slavery, or you own eyes?”

Soon after, God brings the Hebrews to the edge of the Promised Land. God tells Moses to send spies into the Promised Land, to scout it out. Twelve men are sent out, one from each of the Twelve Tribes. Twelve men return, but their advice could hardly be more different. They report, “the land indeed flows with milk and honey”. They showed off a sample of the fruit of the land, fruit that would make any farmer proud. But fully 10 of the 12 men say, “The land is not empty, it’s full of people already! Big, powerful people! And they have fortified cities!” But Caleb, speaking for Joshua and himself as members of this group said, “We should attack! We can do this!” “Oh, no,” said the other 10, “these people over there are too much for us.” And they spread rumors that giants were living in the land—devouring even their own people. This threw the camp of Hebrews into a panic. By that night, they’re ready to stone Moses to death for bringing them out of Egypt. They want to go back to slavery—at least there they had “three hots and a cot”! Whom do you trust—the God who delivered you, or the fears of the majority of reporters? Israel chose “B”, and in response, God ordered Moses to turn the people from the very edge of the Promised Land, and God made them wander around in the wilderness for a generation, until all who had rebelled against God’s plan had died in the desert.

After 40 years—the Bible’s way of saying “a generation”—that winnowing had been accomplished, and Moses had brought the people again to the edge of the Promised Land. God transfers leadership from Moses to Joshua. Then, right there, Joshua again puts the same challenge before the people. Listen for God’s Voice, as I read from Joshua 24:14-15:

“Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (NIV)

Said another way, Joshua challenges them: “Who do you trust? Do you truly trust in God? Then, let’s move into His plan, and not our own.” And over many years, with God’s help they take and hold the land God has marked out for them.

Who do you trust? How much do you trust?

During the wilderness wanderings, God gave Moses the Law and the statutes that would set apart His people as different, pure, and pleasing in His sight. Among the many requirements was a “tithing”, or “tenth” of produce, as every family’s “rent” for living in God’s Land. (This was a far better deal than the rents required by many human landlords at the time, and these donations were treated differently than taxes required by landlords or kings. Those rich people used it to enrich themselves and gain more power locally, and internationally. But God’s tithe was used to sustain the nation’s religious and cultural identity, and to feed poor people who had nowhere else to turn.)

But by the time the nation split apart after the reign of King Solomon, and pretty much forever thereafter, it became widespread practice to ignore dedicating a tithe to God. So by the time we get to Malachi, the last little book in the Hebrew Bible, God has to plead with the people who have fallen into hard times all over the land. Malachi (chapter 3, verses 6-18) speaks God's Word to us today, saying,

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty.

"You have said harsh things against me," says the Lord.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'

"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.' "

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name.

"They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."

Who do you trust? Some will trust God and back it with their behavior. Some who say they believe in God will not back it with their behavior. And apparently there are consequences for each choice.

Finally, let us hear from Jesus about the tithe. He told a story—this version is in Luke, chapter 18, verses 9-14—about what trust in God really looks like. Listen once more for God's Word to us TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Hmmm. This is vintage Jesus, isn't it? "Following the rules" is not the end of the matter. In the end, what God wants is US, not our money. If he gets US, if He gets our trust, He will have our money, too. But "it's not the money, honey". It's you. It's me. Does God have YOU? Whom do you trust? Do you trust in God, or do you trust more your own smarts and strength?

I could easily pick out several other telling Bible passages showing people who trust God, and people who do not. The story of "Eve's Fatal Choice and Adam's Acquiescence" from Genesis 3 is the same issue. Who do you trust—the God who made you, or your own reasoning?

Eve—not to mention Adam—make their decisions without God, and thus they break their relationship with God. When we “dis” our relationship with God, there are terrible consequences. As Paul puts it in Romans 1, God gives us up to the consequences of our decisions to live on our own, without Him. (That’s a frightening power God has put in people’s hands.)

Clearly, God’s design is for an unbroken, continuous relationship with each of us; that’s how we’re designed, and that’s how life works best. Otherwise, when we live without God, we’re violating our design parameters. It’s like using the wrong tool—like using a sharp-bladed screw driver to open a paint can. You can do it, but you could punch holes in the can and even risk stabbing yourself with the sharp point. (Not that I know anything about that..., or that this scar on my left hand between my thumb and index finger means anything....)

I once worked for a couple of weeks in an alcoholism treatment center in the wilderness of Western Kansas. Among many things I remember was a talk given by the chaplain. He drew a line on the board—“Fear” on one side, “Trust/Faith” on the other. He said, “This is the world’s shortest test of mental health. Put your own “X” on the place on the line where you are between “fear” and “trust”. You see, you don’t have to be religious or even spiritual to wrestle with this core issue.

Ever since that first “fall from grace”, God has honored that distance we created from him, but He has not given up on us. God now sends us messages more indirectly. We have God’s Written Word. We have prayer, worship, Sacraments, “chance” circumstances, and more. Through these channels we get a vision of how God has designed us for relationship with Him.

Who do you trust? And as a result, how much should you give to God through this church during our new Mission Year that begins July 1?

I don’t know.

Maybe you should give less, if that’s how little you trust God. In our house, we are not sure if Sharon will be keeping her job, so we’re not changing our pledge from last year. We don’t want to make a promise we can’t keep. So this year, we may be one of those pledgers who wait until December, and then give more based on the actual receipts or their stock profits. [You know, it’s ‘way more advantageous from a tax perspective to give appreciated stock to the church than straight cash. But you probably already knew that.]

Or—based on your growing trust of God, which always begins with a decision, a risk, an experiment for most of us—maybe you should give more. And if you really trust God, then you know that all you have belongs to God, anyway. God gave you the health to make the money; why didn’t you slowly die of polio like so many did in the 40’s and 50’s, or embrace that telephone pole that you hit when you were a young adult and walked away? God gave you the family upbringing and education to make your way successfully. Oh, yes—and He gave you life, and the invitation to restore the relationship with Him he designed you for, as Jesus demonstrated. What part of your money and your life doesn’t He already own?

It’s all “on loan” to us—our lives, our money, our possessions—and we are the managers who will have to report to the Owner on our tenure with His gifts.

How much should you give to God through this church? I don't know. But I trust—you and God will make a decision that extends your trust of God, and builds a stronger bond. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:21, par.) You want to trust and treasure God more? Give more. You'll care more about your money making a difference. You'll pay attention to God more often, and feel more of God's pleasure, which will build your trust....

There was a knock on the door of the hut occupied by a missionary in Africa. When he went to the door, the missionary found one of the native boys holding a large fish in his hands. The boy said, "Reverend, you taught us what tithing is, so here -- I've brought you my tithe." As the missionary gratefully took the fish, he questioned the child. "If this is your tithe, where are the other nine fish?" At this, the boy beamed and said, "Oh, they're still back in the river. I'm going back to catch them now."

Take the risk. After all, who do you trust?

[Introduction to The Lord's Supper]

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 3, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]