

“What Trust Looks Like”

January 24, 2021

Scripture: I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Those words from Paul may sound a little puzzling to us. Why live in such denial? It sounds so nihilistic and sad. Something in us resists the idea of living “as though not...” Living as though we aren’t living at all. It may help, though, to know a little about what the people Paul is writing to are going through. They live in Corinth, a large port city in the Roman Empire. It was a place where all sorts of cultures converged and crossed paths. It was full of shrines and temples to various gods representing religions from all over the world. How was a small, newly born religion supposed to survive?

They had to set themselves apart somehow. They had to remove themselves from the concerns of the world. Paul believed the world would soon come to an end. He was convinced Christ was returning very soon, within his own lifetime, and unless the members of the churches he founded were prepared they would be left out. He wants them to remain disciplined, to keep their minds and hearts fixated on Christ and not be distracted by worldly concerns. What he wants them to do is actually much harder than some groups that remove themselves entirely from society. He wants them to be in the world but not of the world. He wants them to be married and to mourn and rejoice, to have possessions and deal with the world, but to be detached from all of it.

That’s a tall order under any circumstances. Maybe if you’re convinced that things are coming to an end really soon, then it’s a little easier, but keeping that attitude all the time when life can be so demanding of our attention is nearly impossible. And from our vantage point two thousand years later, when obviously Christ hasn’t returned in the way Paul imagined, living this way makes no sense at all. But even though Paul had very different expectations for the future than we do, I think his main concern is one we still have to deal with.

At the heart of Paul’s gospel was the issue of trust. Where do we put our trust; what does trust look like; how is it expressed in our daily lives? Is it the sort of blind obedience we see demonstrated by the fishermen who drop everything to follow Jesus? Is that the sort of trust we should have? Is that remotely realistic in our world? Or is it something more nuanced, something harder to articulate and demonstrate? While the disciples’ immediate response to Jesus is admirable, it doesn’t really fit into most of our experiences. Even Paul had to be knocked to the ground and struck blind before he was convinced.

Learning to trust is a problem that runs all through scripture. Why else would the psalmist need to exhort the people to trust in God at all times if it were something that came easily to everyone? Over and over Israel has trouble putting their trust in God, even though they have the history of exodus behind them. And as we’ll soon learn in the gospels that initial response by the

disciples doesn't really last. They find it harder and harder to maintain their trust. Paul knows what people are like. He knows trust doesn't come easily.

Like the people in Corinth we struggle with our tendency to put too much trust in people and things that don't deserve it. We trust politicians and portfolios over the promise of abundance we find in the Bible. We want to somehow control the things we trust or at least be able to see them. Putting our trust in something abstract is hard for us and always has been. Although recently, I think we've had an experience of just how important trusting a process can be when it comes to choosing our leaders. When so many were willing to take the word of an individual over the outcome of the electoral process the result was disastrous. We were fortunate that enough in positions of leadership kept their faith in the process and refused to be bullied.

That's what trust can look like. It looks like resolve in the face of anarchy. The words of the amazing poet laureate Amanda Gorman come to mind when she said,

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,
that even as we grieved, we grew,
that even as we hurt, we hoped,
that even as we tired, we tried,
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.
Not because we will never again know defeat,
but because we will never again sow division.

She expresses trust in our capacity to do right, to be just, to live with honor even when we're faced with so much that challenges our commitments and calls us away from the common good.

And for Paul when it comes to trust the common good is what's at stake. Throughout his letters, not just in this one, he calls folks to put the good of the whole above themselves. When we live as though the things we have and the things we do are of ultimate concern, we can lose sight of the needs of the community. We become self-absorbed and self-absorption erodes trust. Not just trust in each other but in God as well.

Living as though these parts of our lives are not ultimate, detaching ourselves from them, is a discipline that can help us put our trust in God. That doesn't mean we're indifferent to the needs of our families or our livelihoods or our feelings, it means we don't allow those things to have complete command of our attention all the time. We don't let them control us. I've talked now and then about addiction and the dynamics in an addictive family. One of those dynamics is the tendency for the emotional life of the home to be centered around the person who's identified as having the problem, the "identified patient," usually the addicted person. When that happens the person in the center has control over everyone else's lives. Learning to detach emotionally from that person can feel like you're rejecting them. But in fact you're putting yourself in a position where you can offer them real help and not just enable their behavior.

But it's not easy to maintain. Our families can push our buttons better than anyone, so it's a discipline and it takes work. And that's another concern for Paul. Trust takes work. If we want to hold onto this life together and be in deep relationship with God we have to work at it. It's an every day effort. It's not as simple as just dropping our nets and stepping out of the boat once and for all. It's more like dropping the nets and stepping out every single day, sometimes repeatedly in the same day.

This life we're called to share for the glory of God doesn't happen on its own. Many, many things pull us away from it. We're called to live as though they aren't. And as Amanda Gorman would say, "even though we tire, we try." Life in Christ, becoming disciples, trusting in God takes work. But through it all we live in the confidence that in spite of our shortcomings and distractions we are God's own. We are not abandoned to our own devices. In Christ God has entered our experience and walks with us through the difficulties we face. We will never reach perfection. We're called to strive and to trust even when it seems as if we are far from the goal. As the hymn we sang at the opening of our service says,

Come, ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined
By the fall; if you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.
I will arise and go to Jesus; he will embrace me in his arms.
In the arms of my sweet Savior, O there are ten thousand charms.

Amen