

## God's Trust In Us

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The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Stewardship Pledge Sunday  
October 23, 2011

Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34-46

“But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.”  
-- 1 Thessalonians 2:4

Do you remember the first time you got to walk to school by yourself? Or get on the bus by yourself? Or cross the street by yourself? Or go trick-or-treating by yourself?

Do you remember getting the keys to the car and no parent to go with them? Do you remember the first time you got to stay out all night, with no check-in phone call even in the morning?

Or maybe you're at the stage in life where you remember more clearly granting those kinds of privileges – and that's what trust is, really, it's a privilege, not a right – and perhaps you remember, as a parent or grandparent, facing those moments in your own family's life and having to make decisions that entailed risk to one or more of the people you love most in the world. It's a scary business to be in.

Growing up is essentially a game of trust. One party, the younger, wants the other party, the older, to trust that the younger is capable of driving or drinking or staying out all night or having sex.

And the older party, usually parents or grandparents, has to base their decision to grant or withhold those permissions on the trust they have in their child or grandchild. Can this person be trusted with this responsibility?

That's one of those recurring questions that gets us through life. Sometimes the answer is yes, and sometimes the answer is no, but always it turns out to be an adventure, because life is always different on the other side of that crossroad. Our relationships change, sometimes dramatically, when we discover that we can or cannot trust someone, and once our trust in someone has been betrayed or eroded, it's very hard for it to be restored.

If any of you have had to live through the pain of alcoholism or other serious addiction, you know first-hand the truth of what I'm saying. One of the most insidious aspects of addiction is its ability to undermine the addict's trustworthiness. People who are in the grip of addiction simply cannot be trusted. Money given for food or rent or utilities will be used for the addiction. Appointments are not kept because of the disorientation of priorities that accompanies addiction. Excuses are made and lies are told to satisfy or attempt to hide the addiction. And all of this shreds the fabric of trust that holds life together.

Psychologists tell us that one of the most crucial components in a human being's make-up is their ability to trust. Where that ability comes from, and how it develops is still very imperfectly understood, but we know that it's essential for mental, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual health. In fact, without trust, you cannot successfully get through life, and the condition we call paranoia is an impaired ability to trust. And we learn to trust in the same way we learn just about every life skill, which is by seeing it modeled for us.

We learn to trust others by being trusted ourselves. That's at least one of the important places where the confidence comes from that allows us to take the emotional and psychological risks that constitute trust. We trust because we have been trusted – trusted by others, trusted by ourselves, but especially trusted by God.

From Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, the text for this morning's sermon: "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts."

We have been entrusted by God with the gospel. God trusts us enough to hand over to us frail human beings a message of sufficient import that we believe it is salvific – it can save your life. It can save your life, as our Statement of Faith puts it, "from aimlessness and sin," and it can save the life of the world. That message is powerful enough to change things so dramatically that they become, in Paul's words to both the Corinthians and the Galatians, a new creation.

That's what we believe about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And not only *can* that message change the world, but it *has* changed it, which is why we still divide time before and after the arrival of that message. It's that important in human history, and it's been entrusted to us.

How awesome is that? How awesome a responsibility is that? And it's all predicated on trust.

That's one of those unsettling home truths about the gospel: it's predicated on trust, not force. The message that I take from Scripture, from the church, and from experience is that when it comes to the gospel – that awesomely powerful, life- and world-changing experience – even in so important an arena as that, God invites; God does not compel. God does not threaten. God does not intimidate. God's invitation to a new life in Jesus Christ is exactly that: an invitation, not a threat.

And of course we all know perfectly well that this isn't the way large segments of the church have understood the gospel over the centuries and across cultures. In order to define ourselves against others, we've seized those verses in Scripture that say not simply that Jesus is the way to God but that Jesus is the *only* way to God, and we have built those passages into a religious system that is fear-based and fear-driven, predicated not on an invitation, but rather on a threat: accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior or go to hell. That's the so-called unvarnished truth in many churches today. That's what many Christians, in America today and around the world throughout history, have considered Bible-based preaching.

And that is what you will not hear from me, not because I find such passages theologically offensive – which I do – but rather because I find them biblically wrong. I find them distortions of the whole gospel, which is good news for all and not very good news for a few and very bad news for most. I don't believe God's good news for the world, that began in creation and continues all the way through the new creation envisioned in Revelation, is a threat; I believe it's an invitation and a promise, and that it has been entrusted to us. The message of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that self-sacrificial love changes everything or it changes nothing, and that those who inflict suffering in this world, or who look forward to God's inflicting it in the

next, are on the wrong side of the cross.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. That makes me an evangelical, however uneasy some of you may be with that word, and it also makes me a liberal, which makes many more Christians uneasy today. But the Latin root of that word liberal is *liber* which means "free," free not to believe any silly idea that floats through your head, but rather free to work out for yourself how you will proclaim the gospel by living it. Paul told the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (2:12), and that's the freedom of the Christian that Martin Luther famously wrote about. We are freed from a debased external moral law in order to live out a higher, interior spiritual law freely and willingly – a spiritual law that comes to us as invitation and not as threat. That is the great good news that has been entrusted to us.

And that's the message you will hear proclaimed in this church, week after week, year in and year out, in one form or another, as long as I'm your pastor. I'm not ashamed of it and I urge you not to be ashamed of it, either; it's nothing to be ashamed of. But I'm also not going to bully people with it and I urge you not to bully people with it, either. There's no excuse for being an ugly Christian.

But to be a beautiful Christian – to struggle, day in and day out, in big ways and in little ways, in every way, in fact, to become as transparent to God's love as a pane of clear glass – that is a life more than worth living. It is a life worth forming through faith, worth nurturing in the company of other beautiful Christians, and worth sharing through our evangelical witness. That is the kind of life that brought this church into being and has sustained it through this moment, and that's the kind of life that will keep it alive as God's future unfolds.

Today is stewardship pledge Sunday, and in a few minutes we'll all be asked to offer formally our pledge of support for this church. As you bring your pledge card and morning offering forward to the communion table, I hope you will do so remembering that your support of this church is indeed about money, but ultimately it's about the message. It's about the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has been entrusted by a loving God to us. Your support of this church helps keep alive the message that God trusts us to recognize and respond to the power of a love, as Paul says, that is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. That does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. A love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And it is a love that never ends.

That's the message God has entrusted to us. Thanks, thanks, and ever thanks be to God.