

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 17:5-10
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20
THE GOSPEL: Luke 6:17-26

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 17, 2019

“Clearly Trusting the Lord”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm going to try an experiment today. We had developed a habit of here, whenever I preach, the lights would go down, and I started to see a stimulus response and I started seeing a stimulus-response of people catching up on their sleep, and so, thank you, William, just keep them bright. Keep them bright. There's plenty of time to take a nap afterwards.

I want to speak about trust, and trust is such a beautiful word. The clarity comes in life when you can trust God, when you trust God. I remember learning things when I was a Boy Scout. Let's see if I can get this out: A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. No applause needed. It starts with trustworthy. The rest of those don't mean a lick of difference if you don't have that at the beginning. If you can't trust another Scout, of course a great program to develop the character of young men and now young men and women. Forward in faith. And my dad gave me instructions. He gave them pretty early. I think I was just starting to date girls, and he said, "Marry somebody . . .", and I thought "marry?". I'm not looking to get married, but he said, "No, this is important. Marry somebody you can trust." Best advice he ever gave me. Thank God for Debbie.

Those words of trust are words that are profound and deep, and we live in a world of high cynicism and, of course, how we let ourselves down with each other. The first lesson speaks of that. Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make flesh their strength. It would be like a shrub in the desert, and we understand that here in the Sonoran Desert, living in parched places. Like an uninhabited salt land, trusting in mere mortals. Obviously, it's important to develop habits to be trustworthy and to be loyal and to be helpful, but people will let us down, and we will let others down. So, happy are those, blessed are those, who trust in the Lord. Deep-rootedness of life. So, this sermon is for those of us who trust God or have our points of life or think we're at that point in trusting and yet, we often are jolted out of that. Can we trust?

It is an interesting time to be alive, because there are a lot of people who are not trusting the Lord. Met with some people, and they used this term that got me going. I don't know if you've heard this term. I'm spiritual but not religious. Have you heard that phrase? I'm religious, and I hope I can be spiritual in this sermon. Because religion, at its root, means reconnect. Regalare, like religament. That's the point. It's not about all the rules and regulations. It's about trusting that we have practices, scripture, proclamation of the Gospel, sacraments, a variety of different ways to assure our connection with God, but there are so many people who are struggling to have this as a way of life.

In 2005, a book was written by Christian Smith and Linda Denton, and it was called “Soul Searching; The Religious Lives of American Teenagers”. They’re sociologists, and they put this together, and it’s been bouncing around theologians and pastors. It summarized that there are 3 general themes that younger people view of religion. They think that religion is about being moralistic; it’s about being good, being nice. And there’s nothing wrong with that. It hearkens back to a family conversation that we had. We had interesting family conversations at our table, and my mom said something about, “Please be nice. That’s what the Bible says, be nice. My dad jumps in and says, “Nowhere in the Scriptures does it say be nice.” And then he uttered this explanation of the acronym “be nice”: nobody is challenged enough. I love my daddy.

What I’m trying to say is this is so much more than that, isn’t it? It’s about the depth of life, about trusting that God is with us in the highs and in the lows and that, for this life and the life to come, that’s the trust we have. Moralistic and then the 2nd piece is therapeutic. Moralism and therapy. That the point of church is to be happy or to feel good. Certainly, that sounds wonderful, but that’s insufficient for the depth of life that we’ve experienced. We who are a little bit older have the ups and downs, right? And we need a faith and a trust in something more than being happy. We need to know that God is with us in the midst of pain and suffering. And then last is, a word that has been used over the centuries: deism. It’s kind of like God is like a divine butler or maybe perhaps a cosmic therapist, but not around all that much. Once in while is around, but most of the time is remote and so this moralist therapeutic deism – did you ever hear of that in your study of theology? It’s a way of saying that. It’s a lot of pressure on young people, I’d say under the age of 50, cafeteria Christianity. Richard Holloway used that term back in 2001. You’re shopping around for ideas you approve of, and it’s a lot of pressure.

And, then the last is this phrase: spiritual but not religious. Sven Erlinson is noted for using that, but Linda Mercadante put together an explanation of the 5 ways people are spiritual but not religious. Any my simple invite is if you’re in this category, if you know somebody in this category, my prayer is that you can take this searching and turn into trust through the gift of the Holy Spirit. There are dissenters. There are definitely people again religion. They are absolutely veering away. But it’s a relatively small group, the anti-religious. There are many people who are casual, meaning that they, as needed, go through life. In Great Britain, they say are three ways you need the church, and it’s called hatch, match, and dispatch. You might need a baptism, you might a wedding, and you might need a funeral. Hatch, match, and dispatch. That is certainly one way to do it, and we know friends that are like that. But this invitation to go deeper, of life on a daily basis, to trust on a daily basis of God’s life through Christ for us.

There are explorers. They’re kind of like the tourists that are out to discover something about each religion in every country. I think it’s a very respectful way to live, but tourists need a home. You can’t always be on the run, and so the invitation to come back to a faith community and to be with others that may be struggling but are part of your commitment in your community as needed. And then there are those that are seeking. They’re seeking to commit but have been hurt in life, and it’s difficult to trust.

All of us understand that, but it is a limiting factor of faith. The last is immigrants. So, there are the dissenters who are against, the casuals kind of as needed, the explorers who are more like tourists, seekers struggling to commit to anything, and then the immigrants who may be new in faith, but they’re struggling to adjust.

I just want to say the 2nd lesson here is so important. The resurrection of the dead is a weighty issue. We proclaim through the Apostle's Creed. It is not simply a hope. It is something in which we place our trust: that God's creative power is not done. It is this. Carlo Works, who is a theologian at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., said it this way, "How can there be a promise of abundant life if God is not stronger than death?" I think that's a wonderful, powerful way to say it. And, she continues this way, "For God to defeat death is the signal that God has defeated this power of sin." Paul thinks of it that way, that sin and death are connected. God's resurrection of Jesus is the first fruit, the decisive act that has determined God's ultimate victory over the powers of sin. Wise counsel for living.

A lot of our churches have gone away from preaching the resurrection, and they want to be helpful to people, but it is abandoning this depth in which God can be fully trusted – this love and the corrupting powers of sin and death are no longer our future. This is one of the ways we as a church need to continue to speak of the power of the resurrection, first in Christ and then in our own life. It is a power of a God we can trust. How could it be that there is a promise of life if God is not powerful and stronger than death. He most certainly is.

This depth of the church is what I'm speaking of that allows people to trust. I'm just going to say a critique to the church, roughly 40% of our young people under the age of 35 would say they don't identify with any faith group. And, you know what? I'm an organizational guy. I like to keep score, I like numbers to be up, and sometimes I think it's because we don't proclaim the trustworthiness of God and the power of the resurrection and the life eternal through the gift of Jesus Christ. And maybe God's keeping them out of the church until we get that going again. I pray that the church has that reformation and resurgence.

Now, for the gospel lesson itself. This is where I speak about the depth of life, not about simply being happy and being good but trusting God is with us in the midst. And so, in the song we sang, talked about the Sermon on the Mount (that's Matthew) that speaks about that. A simple way to think of Matthew is making sure the Jewish community knew that Jesus was the Messiah. So, this calling, as Moses, bringing the word from on high, that this is the word of God. But this is in Luke, and Luke is much more interested in words like healing and curing, because he was a physician, and he had this as his background. So his emphasis is upon the word of God in the plain places, in the everyday life, in the simple things, not just in the Epiphany on the mountain but in the plain places, the level places, the everyday. And please note that there was this group here, his 12 disciples but a larger group of disciples, a much larger group, and a great multitude. So it says he looked up at his disciples and said . . . And many times I think about this that it's to somebody else, not to me. He's speaking this, brothers and sisters, to us. "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God." And let's make it very clear, Matthew has a "poor in spirit" and that can be rationalized away. I speak here of our affinity with the poor, those who do not have enough economic resources in which to invest in life. We are part of that continuity and part of that community to continue to support and to love and to proclaim that being poor or rich has nothing to do with the love of God, but we are freed in which to bring this message and to support. Blessed are you who are hungry now. That is an opportunity for us to continue to invest into the food pantries and into ministry that directly affects, but it's also hungry for the word of God and there are many of us who are hungry. And you will be filled with the love of God on a daily basis. Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh. This statement of hope that joy comes in the morning, it is more than just a religious thing once a week. It's trusting that God loves in each and every moment of our life.

And then this movement to woe. Woe to you who are rich. It used to be, who are rich? Well, that's us. It certainly statistically, in the world, we in the United States are rich. It's for anyone that puts consolation in having a large enough bank account that if that's our consolation, we will be put to woe as economic seasons change. Woe to us who are full now for we will be hungry. It will come a time when we will be searching and hungry for the love of God, because we that is, we leak, and we need God to continually fill us up. And then lastly, woe to you who are laughing now for you will mourn and weep, and we experience that on a weekly and daily basis here. Chuck and Anita and others that are in the midst of this, God will be us when we are mourning and we are weeping. It's the depth that I love trusting in God.

Last comment here to encourage you is that for trusting God goes all the way through. So the future of the church: do we trust that the future of the church will be one in which God is with us. And the answer, of course, is yes. But we struggle, and our presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote this article. She said, "A lot of people ask what can we do?" And she said that is not the question. She thinks it's more, what is God up to? How do we trust God, and this is her suggestion: How do we reshape the church? First, if we want to attract people to our congregations, to rebuild a memory. I thought that was powerful. To rebuild a memory, God will not bless our efforts. So that's what I pray for is that we're not rebuilding a memory. But she continues, if we're grabbed by the Spirit in baptism, changed by the word, intimately and lovingly connected to Jesus and each other in communion and set free by the grace of God to serve the neighbor, inviting all people into this true life, this trusting life, as I would call it, then we will be part of God's answer. Worship, prayer, scripture, study, generosity, service not in order to save the church but in response to the new life God has given us in Christ. She ended with this beautiful little statement, "Get more people to know more about Jesus." There's a simple statement and true one in itself.

Want to summarize, trusting God on a daily basis in life itself, creates a clarity of God's love that simply attending or dabbling or spiritually seeking for the rest of one's life, as noble a cause as that may be, doesn't provide the clarity that I know I need and I know that you need and I know that the world needs to know of God's love. The weighty issues, the resurrection itself, the power of God's presence in the highs and lows in life, and the opportunities in which we learn to trust one another, we need to trust God. This word trust, I ask as a blessing for you and that this week is an invitation to lean deeply into these promises. God can be trusted. God is trustworthy. Praise be to our Father in heaven, our Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring this truth to life. Amen.