

WHOM DO YOU TRUST

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Every year around the start of football season, Charles Schulz used to draw a “Peanuts” comic strip with same plot. It’s the one where Lucy holds the football for Charlie Brown to kick. Charlie runs toward the ball and just as he thrusts his foot at the ball, Lucy yanks the ball away and Charlie falls flat on his back.

There was one strip I’ll never forget. Lucy invites Charlie to kick the ball, while she holds it for him. He says to her, “You must be crazy. You say you’ll hold the ball, but you won’t. You’ll pull it away and I’ll break my neck.” With an innocent look, Lucy responds, “Why Charlie Brown, how you talk. I wouldn’t think of such a thing. I’m a changed person. Look, isn’t this a face you can trust?” Charlie Brown being Charlie Brown accepts Lucy at her word. “All right, you hold the ball and I’ll run up and kick it.” Sure enough, Lucy is true to form. She jerks the ball away at the last second, and as Charlie flies through the air, about to smash on the ground, he can only mutter, “She did it again.” In the final frame, Lucy leans over Charlie and says, “I admire you Charlie Brown. You have such trust in human nature.” (1)

Jeremiah said, *“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals...The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse. Who can understand it?”* Charlie Brown says, “Amen!”

Our passage from Jeremiah is about trust. It is about where we find direction and sustenance. It is not a call for cynicism about human nature or for questioning other people’s motives; it asks us to consider where we place our

ultimate faith. *“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals...whose hearts turn away from the Lord.”* They are, the psalmist suggests, like shrubs in the desert. They will thirst and find little relief. Conversely, *“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.”* They are like trees planted by the water. They send out their roots by the stream. The heat is not a threat to them. Their leaves stay green. Even in times of drought they bear fruit.

The real issue is not drought in the desert but life and hope in human hearts. The issue is not between a shrub struggling to survive in the desert and a tree thriving by the stream. The issue is between a person who is rooted in God and one who is not. Jeremiah says those who are rooted in secular humanism are cursed, but those who are rooted in God are blessed. He means the person who is rooted in God has resources to see her/him through long dry spells of life, which the person who places his/her faith in money, luck, “street smarts,” or other people does not have.

There is a constant temptation to put our trust in human invention and current thinking for our source of meaning in life and hope for the future. Consider the couple who entered counseling to repair their marriage. Jim met Carol during college. He quickly fell for her. She was bright, beautiful, and a talented pianist; but best of all, she fell for Jim too. Jim was also bright and good-looking, but his self-esteem was low. He had never felt loved by his parents. The fact is they were deficient at loving. They were responsible adults, but Jim was a distraction to them. They seldom spent time with him or showed interest in him. All his life he questioned their love of him. When someone like Carol showed an interest in him, Jim fell head-over-heels for her. When she expressed her love for him, he was

delirious. If someone like Carol could love him, he must be okay, he came to believe. The future would be wonderful.

Things were fine the first year of their marriage.

However, as Carol progressed in her profession, it demanded more and more of her. Jim felt jealous and lonely. He questioned if she really loved him. When children arrived on the scene, her attention was divided even more. Old feelings surfaced of being forgotten and ignored, and therefore unloved, and Jim's self-esteem plummeted. Arguments followed by days of little or no communication became the pattern. Finally, they sought help. Jim gradually came to understand that Carol still loved him, and his real problem was himself.

Self-esteem must be built on something other than the love or attention of someone else, however outstanding they may be. Knowledge that God is real and has made us in his image, that God is so sure of our value that he has saved us from the power of sin and death, through the death and resurrection of his Son, is a basis for esteeming ourselves that no person or event can take from us. This is part of what Jeremiah means, when he says, "*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.*"

Consider also the parishioners of a large church in Boston, which grew to great size and prominence under the leadership of a dynamic and charismatic pastor. He was a gifted preacher, a sensitive counselor, and a best-selling author. He was in constant demand around the country as a conference speaker. Many people came to faith or grew in faith under his ministry. They idolized him and trusted him. When he had an affair and resigned his pastorate, however, they faced a spiritual crisis. He was

their source of direction and sustenance. His moral failure caused doubt and confusion. The parishioners floundered. Many left the church never to return to any church. Their trust was in God's servant not the Lord God. "*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals,*" says Jeremiah.

This works on another level as well. Not only are we tempted to place ultimate trust and hope for life in another person, we are prone to put our trust in humanity in general and in humanistic philosophies. **In the 20th century**, many people and nation groups were tempted to place their trust in **atheistic communism**. It promised a "workers' paradise" and an egalitarian economy and society. It was based on human potential and freedom from the shackles of religion. It was an illusion. The people and nation states that put their trust in communism, while turning away from God, were cursed with unproductive economies, foundationless ethics, and false hopes. **In the 21st century**, the temptation is nationalism, led by a "strongman." It promises ethnic purity, religious hegemony, and economic recovery for us and our clan. To those attracted by **nationalism**, Jeremiah says, "Don't count on it."

"Trust in the Lord," says Jeremiah, and be like a tree planted by a stream. In times of drought, it is not anxious and it continues to bear fruit.

Terry Waite was chained to a wall in a sealed room for months on end. He went to Beirut as a special envoy for the Archbishop of Canterbury to work for the release of hostages, and he himself was taken hostage. Often he found himself gasping for breath and watching helplessly as the fumes from the generator next door seeped into his

cell. Sometimes days went by when he couldn't not sleep because the bronchial infections he'd gotten from the fumes became so bad he couldn't lie down and breathe at the same time. Waite's faith was stretched thin. He faced doubts. He questioned God. Yet, he never lost his faith. In fact he said, "I think my faith was really at the root of my survival. It provided me with hope for the future." (2)

Waite went on to say, "A lot of people look to Christian faith to ease suffering. Well, in some ways it doesn't ease the suffering. Suffering has to be faced and experienced. What it does do is give you the strength to go through it, to proceed. And that seems to be the whole message of the cross, of the Crucifixion." (3) Terry Waite was blessed by faith, his trust in the Lord. He'd long since sunk his roots by the living water of Christ. When the heat came, he struggled, but he survived and bore fruit.

Rob – Crucifix and promise of resurrection.

Mikhail Kazachkov, a Soviet Jew, was arrested by the KGB, when he contacted an American consular official about emigrating to the US. He was sentenced to 15 years in the Gulag. At the time of his arrest, Mikhail, a husband and father of a four-year-old boy, was a physicist with the Soviet Academy of Science. He collected modern Russian art and lived a comfortable life. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the hell of the Gulag. He hadn't thought about God for years. However, before an audience at an electric utility conference in Portland, Oregon, he described the cold and hunger, and why cold is harder to bear than hunger. He told of enduring solitary confinement that totaled over six years. Someone asked him what he thought about God. He smiled and said, "I had a lot of time to think

about this. I have to say there is an order, there is a purpose, there is a God. (4)

Mr. Kazachkov chose Christianity during his imprisonment after reading the gospels. Christianity is valid, he believes, because the theory is elegant, because it can be reduced to one simple principle – God is love; and because it is viable, it has worked for over two millennia. He went to prison without faith, but the Spirit of God, through Jesus Christ, caught him and sustained him throughout. Mikhail Kazachkov, like Terry Waite, was blessed by his trust in God. In the midst of the barren Gulag, he had a stream. He sunk his roots into Christian faith and put aside despair for hope.

⁷Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

What is this blessedness the Lord desires to give us?

It's the ability to stay green and bear fruit even in times of drought. As Terry Waite says, "It is all tied into the crucifixion of Jesus." He suffered and died, but he rose again. There is hope for every human circumstance, even death. With God there is hope in even the bleakest situation. We say it succinctly in the communion service: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

**Jeremiah poses one elemental question this morning:
Whom do you trust? Trust God.**

Sources:

1. *Pulpit Resource*, Year A, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 10
2. "A Test of Faith" by Peggy Landers in the 1/25/92 issue of *The Tampa Bay Tribune*.
3. Ibid
4. "Can You Find God in the Gulag?" by Laura J. Rittenhouse in *Fifth Avenues*, in the February 1992 issue.