

TRUST VERSUS FEAR

Matthew 6: 25-33

Fred was someone I first met when he came into town to visit his mother. His mother was a member of my congregation. He would visit her often enough, but she wanted us to meet so we could get to know one another. We talked about life and many things. I was fascinated as Fred shared his journey with me. He had been a corporate executive in a large company. He was making a lot of money and succeeding as far as outward appearances go. Promotion after promotion meant a big house, private schools for the children and flexibility for his spouse's career as they could hire help around the house. But Fred was burning out. He was deeply unhappy and stressed all the time. Worry was becoming chronic for him and fear with every rise and fall in the market determined his blood pressure. Eventually he had a massive heart attack along with a mental breakdown. Following months in rehab with various treatments for his mental and physical health, Fred knew that he could never go back... His spouse didn't like the stressed out Fred, but she was greatly attached to the lifestyle it afforded. Eventually, she took the children and left for a better deal with someone else. Fred took this hard. But it was one more reason to re-evaluate everything in his life.

Well, re-evaluation meant a major change in his lifestyle - a healthier lifestyle and a much simpler one too. One of the big discoveries for Fred besides spirituality was yoga. In fact, he so fell in love with yoga that he bought himself a studio with a little apartment on the upper level. After doing his training and getting certified, he opened his studio. Even though his little business teaching yoga would never really pay for itself, Fred was happy to live the simpler lifestyle he had embraced. It was liberating actually. He felt happier than he had felt in a long time. He was also much healthier in every way. He was learning to let go and trust that all would be well. He had time to travel and to visit with his mom whom he loved and admired. He had time to give to his kids who were now in a public school as he couldn't afford to send them to private school anymore. Fred had few things, but he was alive, he was at peace and his life was in hands greater than his own.

I had a lot of admiration for Fred. Even as I had never had that kind of stress and fear course through my life, Fred's capacity to let it all go, to surrender, to trust what would be and work on being his best self rather than focussing on padding his bank account... I found all that deeply admirable.

Well, I think that even though Fred's spirituality was not explicitly Christian, Fred had a lot of Jesus wisdom in him. In fact, our gospel reading reflects a lot of what Fred discovered for himself. But in order to get at what this wisdom is exactly, I'd like to draw from another great teacher of the faith. His name was Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher was a German Protestant theologian who lived, taught and preached in Berlin around 1800. Schleiermacher

also had the heart of a mystic and he felt too much of the Christianity of his time was stuck in people's heads with a focus on practical actions disconnected from the heart. You did things because God required them of you. It was law and duty. Being a good citizen, a good Christian and a good German were all wrapped up together. But what about being inflamed in one's heart? What about being passionate about what you did and being taken up by larger forces you gave yourself to in complete trust wherever that led you?

Schleiermacher was particularly concerned because Christianity was beginning to decline especially among the intellectuals, artists, musicians and cultural leaders of his people. He called them: "The cultured despisers of religion." They were part of a larger cultural and spiritual wave called "Romanticism." Romanticism was a reaction to the intellectualism or rationalism of the previous era in Europe. A lot of new knowledge was being discovered and new ideas were being thought. But without the heart at the centre you might as well be dead. Romantics found in the natural world, the forests, mountains, rivers and streams, the creatures, the trees, the landscapes, the oceans... the emotions, the smells, sights, tastes, sounds and touch... through the body into the soul... and this, far more than some intellectual concept of God, was what excited, inflamed and transformed the human spirit...

Well, Schleiermacher's passion was to engage these "cultured despisers of religion" who were his colleagues and friends. He wanted to bring together his church world and his cultural world. And so, he took it upon himself to reconstruct his theology on a different foundation – the foundation of the heart. He wanted to persuade his friends that at the heart of nature, the heart of life, the heart of their spiritual experience and artistic creativity is the Holy Spirit. God is in all things and the animating force in all things. The heart's true foundation is God, and faith in God rightly understood and internalized is the true fulfillment of the human spirit.

Among the books Schleiermacher wrote was a large volume simply called: *The Christian Faith*. In the opening section, He defines faith. He says that faith has to do with a certain kind of knowing, and it leads to a certain kind of doing. But much more primary, he says, is the heart of faith as a kind of feeling (*Gefühl* in German). And what kind of feeling is faith? It is the feeling of absolute trust. Yes, it's about God and trusting God, but Schleiermacher wants to emphasize the feeling of it, the experience of it, the trust that carries you through and roots your life at its core. Imagine having the kind of trust that no matter what happens, there is a larger power, a larger force and a larger presence that carries you, inspires you and works in and through you to bless the world with beauty, compassion and goodness. Imagine...

OK, but what does such trust in a larger reality, call it God, mean when you can't see God or when God doesn't have arms and legs or the kind of tangible power to influence or control circumstances and systems in the world? What does trust in a larger goodness mean when bad things can happen to you and those you love as much a good things can?

Now we are ready to zero in on our gospel lesson. Unfortunately, these words of Jesus have been misinterpreted and mis-applied more times than can be counted. Just taken in a surface way, what is Jesus telling the crowd gathered to listen to his wisdom? He's telling them not to worry. What kinds of things would they worry about? Things like having enough to eat and drink and enough clothes to wear. Rather than get stressed out with worry about such things and fear of never having enough, says Jesus, look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They're not consumed with stress, worry and fear, and yet they blossom and bloom and always have enough to survive and thrive.

And besides, says Jesus, will worry add any more time to your life or quality to your life? Will worry not, instead, rob you of living fully in the moment and soaking up all the beauty and goodness there is if we but have the eyes to see it and heart to feel it? "Sure Jesus, what you say makes a lot of sense and we know deep down, most of us anyway, that what you say is true. But just because something is true and right, doesn't mean we can actually live it. Easier said than done Jesus! Why make us feel more inadequate than we already do? Why not help us, instead, with what we need to overcome our worry and fear."

Ah, but this is, actually, what this passage is about if we dig a little deeper. First of all, there is the context. Who is Jesus speaking to? He's speaking to people who have very little food and clothing. He is speaking to people who are always living on the edge and feeling very vulnerable. Moreover, he is speaking to people who live within a system of oppressive domination impossible to change on the outside. At least in comparison to anything we know here today. If you can't change much of your situation on the outside, how do you change your inside and find the kind of power on the inside that may actually empower you on the outside and even threaten those outside systems of domination?

You see, just focussing on outside issues that afflict us without doing any inner work will make us ever more resentful, bitter and hateful, or burn us out in despair. OK, but what, then, is this inner work to which Jesus calls his people then and us here today?

First of all, we must learn from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They exist out of total trust. The beauty of trust leads to the beauty of their existence in a way all human creative effort can never attain (Jesus cites King Solomon famed for the glory of the artistic opulence of his palace). Even the best human art cannot compare to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air in how effortless it seems their trust is and the beauty of their existence...

Learning to live with nature's rhythms, and learning to align life with such rhythms... Learning how to give and trusting the receiving, building relationships of reciprocity and trusting totally in what can be while embracing the goodness of the moment... Why is it so difficult for us to learn this? How can we open up again our capacity to see, hear, taste, smell, touch and feel now and trust that we will be given what we need to make it tomorrow?...

It's not that Jesus doesn't know that tomorrow may be difficult, that we have much concrete to worry about and that planning is essential to making it in life. No. But Jesus is concerned about how our fear and worry actually cripple us from thriving in a way that total trust may liberate and empower us for more abundant living and coping, even thriving... Today and tomorrow is lived much more effectively and beautifully when trust is coursing through our spiritual veins rather than fear.

But this brings it to the second and final wisdom Jesus has to offer. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Righteousness is another word for justice, and justice is the social form of love. Building networks of love requires trust. I have to risk trusting you with my heart and my life and this invites you to reciprocate trust with me. Reciprocity of trust opens up pathways to love in caring for one another and being there for each other. This builds up hope for what we can do together and how we can watch out and support one another as each of us needs it in times of life. This also threatens systems of domination and power that seek to keep us isolated and stuck in fear to control us. When we live out of trust rather than fear we are less threatened and more empowered to believe change is possible, a better world is possible and a better deal is possible too. We are stronger together than alone.

So then, trust, like love, is a relational term. I have to trust in God, in others, in creation, in what will be. Fear, on the other hand, isolates and segregates. I live in mistrust. My worry curves in on itself and I am paralyzed and imprisoned. What the artistry of the natural world teaches us – the birds of the air and the lilies of the field - is that even when total trust seems like a risky and foolhardy way to be, it actually liberates and empowers us. Schleiermacher was onto something. Like Fred, we learn how to see, taste, smell, touch and savour the moment and what is in front of us.

But Jesus also adds the relational dimension of the kingdom of justice, where care for one another builds up our trust in one another rather than the mistrust and fear that are so prevalent in our world. Fear and mistrust only serve to empower those systems and people who want control and dominate in our world. Only the building of networks of trust and reciprocity of loving care will make us strong, able to change what is bad to better, and strong against the myth that we are powerless to challenge oppressive systems in our world.

PRAYER: Give us faith, O God... May our trust in you be total... May we learn how to let go, how to live in the moment and see your beauty in all that is around us... May we trust what you can do in and through us as we reach out, as we challenge and as we accept flaws and imperfections around us and in us too. We trust your love. We see it in the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. We don't have to be everything and yet we are also so much more than we imagine... Amen.