

A MATTER OF TRUST
Psalm 27

This week the results of a national poll were announced. It suggested that about a quarter of U.S. citizens trust the federal government all or most of the time. Amazing it was so high! That means 75% of us have varying degrees of distrust of the “feds”. It ranges from those who “trust but verify” to those who believe pretty much every conspiracy theory floating about the Internet. So we have folks who believe it when a federal employee says, “I work for the government and I am here to help you.” Others who believe that the federal government can’t wait to bring you or the ones you love before a so-called “death panel.”

Folks, we live in a strange world. A world deeply divided. Did you watch Thursday’s day long meeting at Blair House on health care? I suppose one generous way to describe this sit-down between Republicans and Democrats is that they left the meeting no more divided than when they began. Could you detect a lack of trust around the table? Can you say, “The fall elections are scheduled for November 2”?

And it’s not just the federal government. All you have to do is watch the television news and you might be inclined to do the following: never again drive your Toyota; never trust your credit card company again; give up on getting a loan for just about anything; never again bail out Wall Street lest they simply give themselves huge bonuses, etc. etc. Folks, we live in a time-perhaps exacerbated by the 24 hour news cycle and the Internet-when it’s hard to trust anybody about anything. We live in a land of computer viruses and “urban legends” and scams and then some. By the way, have you checked to see if your bank is one of the 700 or so the FDIC has put on a “watch list”? That means your bank may be on the brink of failure. So would you say there is a lack of trust in the land?

Trust is a precious commodity. The human condition makes it difficult for us to trust anyone unconditionally and unequivocally. After all, we find ourselves east of Eden and inside all our shoes are feet of clay. So we proceed with caution ever aware that we ourselves are not always 100% trustworthy. And neither is anyone else. Human trustworthiness is never a perfect “10”. The best of us? In the language of Olympic judges, maybe a 9.5. The majority of us? Well, let’s just say we are a variable lot. And so our situation boils down to this: a matter of trust.

The Psalmist faced this human predicament with eyes wide open. This wonderful poet found himself surrounded by the worst of the human family. He calls them evildoers, adversaries, foes, an army encamped against him. The Hebrew scholar Elmer Leslie has suggested the psalmist is not faced with armed conflict in the literal sense. Rather the psalmist has been falsely accused by the liars and scoundrels who seek to harm him and take his possessions. The phrase “to devour my flesh” in Hebrew is a familiar figure of speech for a false accusation.

And like many Jewish people of faith, the psalmist goes to the temple to pour out his heart to the Lord. Instead of distress driving him to despair, here distress drives him into the arms of God. It appears that the psalmist stays the night in the courts of the Lord praying for God’s protection and care. This is the practice called “incubation”, sleeping in the presence of God who alone can help and heal. Jesus himself engages in the practice of incubation not in the hostile temple but in the Garden of Gethsemane. Now the psalmist goes to this one safe place, the temple of the Lord, to address the One who alone promises help and healing.

In this night of prayer the psalmist turns to God alone. Listen as he pours out his heart to the One he trusts: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” No doubt, Paul echoed these stirring words in the eighth chapter of Romans: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Listen to the psalmist’s courageous affirmation: “My heart shall not fear...I will be confident.”

In essence, the psalmist prays: “I will trust the One who will hide me in the shelter in the day of trouble, the One who will conceal me under the cover of the tent, the One who will set me high on a rock.” For us as well, God can be trusted to be our shelter, our tent of covering, and our strong rock. That’s why the psalmist vows, “Now my head is lifted up.” His heart is lifted up and his spirits are strong. This is the prayer of a trusting soul who has learned to rely upon God even in the bleakest of moments. In the silent darkness of the temple, the psalmist does not pray for the downfall of his enemies. Rather he prays only for fellowship with the living God.

This then is the psalmist’s deepest prayer: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I see after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and to behold the beauty of the Lord.” His greatest hope is this: “I will offer sacrifices in God’s tent with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.”

For the psalmist, living perpetually in God’s presence is the soul’s most profound delight. Nothing can compare with this, to behold the beauty of the Lord and surround the throne of God with perpetual praise. We are reminded that Psalm 23 has the same hope: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This is trust that is utterly sublime.

The Psalter is filled with compelling declarations of trust in the face of great difficulty: “Know that the Lord has shown me marvelous grace...in peace I will both lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety”(Ps. 4). “For God my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God, who alone is my rock and my salvation, so I shall not be shaken...seek the Lord at all times, O my people; pour out your heart before our God”(Ps. 62).

“Lord, you have been our refuge in all generations; before the mountains were brought forth or before you formed the earth, from everlasting to everlasting you are God...satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days”(Ps. 90). The Psalter affirms repeatedly, “In God’s presence there is fulness of joy”(Ps. 16). In God alone we trust and in God alone there is fulness of joy, sublime joy and peace.

So this was the experience of a believer long again. It involved a dramatic night in the temple praying to God. Perhaps in your life learning to trust God is a more gradual process. As you face the challenges in your life, learning to trust God is an acquired taste.

For most of us maybe it’s like what happened to William Sloan Coffin, chaplain at Yale and later pastor at Riverside in New York. Coffin was a heady young student who found himself in an Ivy League school surrounded by skeptics and doubters. He spent much of his undergraduate days dialoguing with philosophers and theologians about the Big Questions, the question of God’s existence and faith and reason and all that. Finally, he was confronted with the Biggest Question of all: Is Jesus for real? That led Coffin to speak with the university chaplain. This good pastor responded to Coffin’s question by saying, “You know, I really trust that God is for real and so is Jesus.”

And so the young student, so full of questions and doubts, finally took a trembling leap of faith, perhaps more a baby step of faith. And this is how Coffin describes it in his autobiography “Once to Every Man and Nation”: “And so I committed as much of myself as I could risk to as much of God as I could believe in.”

Apparently that was enough for God. For the day would come when William Sloan Coffin would entrust his whole heart to the living God, who takes us as we are and then leads us on a journey of trust. It is a journey where we learn to entrust more and more of our hearts to the One who is our light and salvation. It is a trust walk where we must finally ask, Of whom shall I be afraid? On this day I invite you to commit as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you can trust. The One in whom we trust, the One to whom we entrust our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.