

REFORMATION SUNDAY – 10/28/18

Who Do You Trust?

(Psalm 46)

A young woman was once sunbathing on the beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, and carrying a towel, came up to her and asked, “Do you believe in God?”

Now she was a little surprised and somewhat taken aback by his rather forward question, as you could well imagine. But she replied anyway, “Why, yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”

Then he asked her, “Do you go to church every Sunday?” Again, despite the intrusive nature of his request, she answered, “Yes.”

He then asked her, “Do you read your Bible and pray every day?” At this point, she was starting to get a little annoyed. But she was also very curious about where all this was leading to, however. So, once again, she answered, “Yes, actually, I do.”

At this point the little guy let out a *big* sigh of relief and made his final request, “So, here’s the thing miss, will you hold my money while I go swimming?”

Obviously he wanted to verify, to check and see, if she was *worthy* of his trust... Who do you trust? It’s an important question, isn’t it? When you get right down to it.

There was actually a TV game show with that very name, as a matter of fact. And it was hosted by none other than Johnny Carson, before he got

the “Tonight Show” gig, that is. Perhaps some of you remember it. But I won’t ask for a show of hands because you’d be giving away your age if you acknowledged that you did, since it ran from 1957 to 1963!

Believe it or not, its *original* name, though, was “Do You Trust Your Wife?” Originally, you see, all the contestants were married couples. And the interesting twist, of course, was whether or not the husbands would actually trust their wives to answer the quiz questions correctly Or would elect to answer the questions themselves. The show obviously played on the fact that some husbands apparently have, or at least *had*, a *hard time* trusting their wives!

So who do *you* trust?

Polls and surveys, including one just out this past June from Forbes Magazine, tell us that, here in America, there has been a noticeable *decline* in trust in recent years. No big surprise there, right?

Among the results, the military enjoys the highest level of trust from the American people at 74%. And Congress, again not surprisingly, has the *lowest* at 11%. The good news is that the church ranks towards the top, number 4 actually, at 38%. However, the bad news is that this means that more than 50% *don't* trust in the church.

But just stop and think about it for a second. We live in a time when the president tells us not to trust the media. The media tells us not to trust the president. Republicans warn us against trusting Democrats. And Democrats say the same thing about Republicans. It’s pretty much gotten to the point where nobody trusts *anybody* anymore!

So who *can* we trust?

Today, of course, we're celebrating Reformation Sunday. And Martin Luther, the obscure German priest and professor, who taught at a small, backwater German university before skyrocketing to fame for his 95 Theses and other theological writings, had his *own* personal crisis surrounding this issue of trust.

On one level, the church of his day basically said just trust *in the church*. It was taught and believed, for example, that if you lived according to the teachings of the church, and dedicated yourself to doing all the things the church *said* you should do, then everything would be okay. Your sins would be forgiven and you would be welcomed into heaven. In other words, through fasting, and pilgrimages, and offerings, and other sacrificial works, the church's great store of grace would, in a sense, now become yours.

So, as a young man, that's exactly what Martin Luther did; or at least *attempted* to do. He left law school and, much to his father's great disappointment and disapproval by the way, became a monk and then later a priest instead. In fact, so dedicated was he to the rules and sacrifices of monastic living that Luther, himself, later said, "If anyone could have ever gotten to heaven through his *monkery* it was me!"

Besides meticulously following the rules of the Augustinian order to which he belonged, Luther *also* kept a meticulous record of his sins; both real and imagined. Every little infraction, every tiny mistake, no matter how inconsequential, sent Luther immediately running to the confessional in order to unburden his conscience. So much so, that he nearly wore out his confessor, von Staupitz, who is alleged to have

finally shooed him away saying, “Don’t come back until you’ve actually done something *worth* confessing!”

So, on the one hand, Luther trusted in all the rules and regulations and expectations of the church of his day. But in dedicating himself to following them – as perfectly as humanly possible – Luther also placed a great deal of trust in *himself* as well, didn’t he? On another level, he truly believed – at least at first – that he could perfectly fulfill all the demands of the church and all the demands of God’s word at the very same time.

But he couldn’t! The sad fact is that his dedicated efforts at perfection still left him feeling incomplete and unworthy. No matter how hard he tried, he was painfully aware of his repeated mistakes and failures. No matter how faithfully he managed to live a devout life, according to the teachings of his day, it still brought him no satisfaction or sense of peace. The sobering reminder that tortured Luther’s soul again and again and again was the simple fact that he *could not* trust in himself any more than he could trust in the church that, he began to discover, had actually strayed from the basic teachings of scripture.

You see, it was when the Augustinians, sensing his unique intellect, sent him to train to become a biblical scholar, that Luther finally began to see where the church of his day had gotten off-track, so to speak, and what the scriptures *really* were saying about the life of faith and the *nature* of faith.

We are all probably aware that Luther developed a great affinity for the Apostle Paul, in particular Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and the apostle’s great insight (as we heard in our second reading this morning) that

“since all have sinned... they are now justified by (God’s) grace as a *gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

But it was also in the *Psalms* that Luther discovered much of his theological bearings and underpinnings as well. In fact, when Luther began to lecture as a university professor *on* the Bible, it was not the writings of Paul that were his initial focus, as I recall, but rather the book of Psalms. And, arguably, his most favorite psalm was Psalm 46; the psalm upon which he based his most famous hymn: “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

Who do you trust? Who *can* we trust? Luther’s great insight, of course, was his gradual realization, through his now meticulous study of *scripture*, that ultimately we cannot trust in the church, nor can we trust in ourselves. In the end, the only one we *can* trust, the only one we *dare* trust... is God!

“God is our refuge and strength,” declares the opening verse of Psalm 46, “a very present help in trouble.” Which Luther, again, rendered as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” In German, it’s actually “Ein feste burg ist unser Gott.”

And as Hans Wiersma, who teaches in the religion department of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, points out, “mighty fortress” is not quite the meaning of the German “feste burg.” In German, he writes, the word “fest” means “fast” – not “fast” as in “quick” or “speedy”, but “fast” as in “unmoving,” or “secure.”

That makes sense because, when something is unmoving or secure, we say it “holds fast,” right? That, says Wiersma, “is the idea of ‘ein feste

burg'; a fortification that holds fast against *any* assault, a castle that can withstand *every* onslaught, a citadel that keeps those on the inside safe and secure from *all* attacks."

Wiersma goes on to point out that our English rendering "a very present help in trouble" is not the only possible translation here either. That verse, he says, may also be read as "God is our refuge and strength, a *well-proved* help in trouble." In other words, it's not just that God will be present with us in our time of need, but *also* that we have a God who is "time-tested" and over and over again can be *trusted* to keep us secure in those moments as well.

The word "trust" itself is also critical here. The *word* trust has its origins in the Indo-European root *droust* meaning "solid" and "lasting." In Old English it referred to "confidence" and "dependence." While, in the 14th century, Chaucer used the word "trust" to mean "virtual certainty and well-grounded hope."

That's what the psalmist means here. We have a God who, like an impregnable castle, protects us; a God who has proven this time and time again; a God who is, therefore, *utterly* dependable. In short, a God whom we can trust; a God to whom we can hand over our burdens and cares when they become more than we can possibly bear on our own; a God who will protect and sustain us no matter what illness or injury or tragedy or setback may befall or confront us; and a God who will never leave or abandon us.

The great 19th century evangelist Dwight Moody once said, "Trust in yourself and you are doomed to disappointment. Trust in your friends and they will die and leave you. Trust in money and you may have it

taken from you. Trust in reputation and some slanderous tongue may blast it. But trust in God, and you are never to be confounded in time or eternity.”

Who do you trust? For Psalm 46 and for Martin Luther, the answer is simple. Trust in God...

But what *about* Martin Luther, and Psalm 46 for that matter? He was a man of such great faith, you might say. He became famous and respected. What did *he* know about trust?

The year was 1527, some ten years after Luther’s 95 Theses that rocked the world and jumpstarted the movement that became known thereafter as the Reformation. Those ten years had taken a toll on Luther, however. Preaching and teaching and leading a movement, and defending himself against critics coming at him from every side, had left Luther exhausted and drained, and facing a series of health problems.

He was 44 years old now; at a time when the average lifespan was about 40. In April of that year, a dizzy spell struck him while preaching. Then things got worse. By July he wondered if he even had long to live. He was assaulted with depression, heart issues, and severe intestinal problems.

At one point, he wrote about his illnesses, “I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God... But through the prayers of the saints,” he said, “God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.”

Eventually, with the help of his doctors, Luther regained his strength and health. Then, just as he was recovering, the plague struck Wittenberg. Even though his wife Katie was pregnant at the time, Luther's house was nevertheless transformed into a hospital and he watched many of his friends die. Then his own son became deathly ill, although he survived. But a few months later his daughter Elizabeth *did* die.

Clearly these were circumstances and challenges that would try the patience and rock the faith of *any* person, including Martin Luther. And yet it was at this time, this precise moment, more than likely around October of 1527, that Luther actually *wrote* "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

In other words, at the very moment that Luther might have and perhaps even *should have* abandoned his faith in God, he turned the hope-filled words of Psalm 46 into arguably the battle-hymn of the Reformation. At a time when no one would have faulted him if he had simply given up in despair, Luther clung to the only one in his life he *could* cling to; the only one he *could* trust. And that was God...

As Dan Clendenin has written, "Luther found great solace in Psalm 46, and some have even called it his *favorite* psalm." The ancient poem, he points out, begins with metaphorical descriptions of global cataclysms – the earth giving way, mountains crumbling into the sea, and waters that 'roar and foam.'" Not unlike the storms and global challenges of our *own* day, come to think of it.

Then, "on the political front," says Clendenin, "nations are in an uproar, kingdoms fall." Again, the psalmist could just as easily be writing about today as well.

Even so, and despite these fearsome forces that have been unleashed upon the earth, the psalmist reminds his readers that “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

And so it should be for *us* as well. It’s a scary world in which we live. Politically, environmentally, sociologically, economically, culturally, you name it, there are immense forces working in our midst; often times seeming to threaten our very future and certainly our sense of hope and wellbeing.

Who can you trust in times like these? Who *dare* we trust?

It’s in times like these, that Psalm 46 holds the key. “Be still... and know that I am God.”

In 1527, the “deepest year of Luther’s depression” according to his biographer Roland Bainton, Luther somehow managed to *be still*... and to turn over his life with all of its serious problems and challenges... and to know, and to *trust*, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that God was an ever-present stronghold in his life. Though life in this world may come at us at any given moment with trials and tribulations that would frighten *anyone*, including a Martin Luther, the only answer, the only response that makes any sense, is to trust in God...

Who do you trust? Our answer to that question is what makes us people of faith. And our answer to that question makes all the difference in the world. Like the little boy’s questions in the story at the beginning of my sermon this morning, God has proven to be *worthy* of our trust.

Amen.

