

In God We Trust"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
2/15/04
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IN GOD WE TRUST

"In God we trust." You can find that motto on your money. Do you know the story of how that motto came to be? Simon Chase, Secretary of the Treasury under Abraham Lincoln asked a man named James Polloch, the director of the Mint to come up with some appropriate words.

In a time of national turmoil, Chase wrote a letter to Polloch which said, "No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins."

And so, with those instructions, Polloch came up with the motto,
"In God we trust"

Except for some rather outspoken critics of religion, most folks are willing to accept this motto without question. It is the religious equivalent of motherhood and apple pie.

But, I think that though it is easy to give verbal assent to this motto, it is much more difficult to actually put it into practice. Regardless of what we say we believe, many of us often put our ultimate trust in something or someone other than God. We place ultimate trust in our own power and in the power of other human beings. Doing that, of course is the very definition of idolatry.

Many of the problems which plague us individually and as a country are, at their heart, problems that come from idolatry, from our lack of trust in God alone. We trust in human beings and human institutions instead of trusting in God.

So what can we do about that? How can we learn to trust God instead of those things that are less than God? This is not as easy and straightforward a process as you might think. Idolatry disguises itself in many forms. More than that, we tend to hide our true motives from ourselves.

But, one of the ways to combat idolatry is to name the idols, to expose the things in which we really trust.

MAMMON

An obvious idol is money itself. Our money bears the motto, "In God we trust," but ironically that motto has become literally true. Yes, we trust in god, and our god is money. The driving force in our country is a love of money and those things that money can buy.

But, the Bible tells us plainly that the love of money is the "root of all evil." (See 1 Timothy 6:10) Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24)

That word, mammon means more than money. It means the greedy pursuit of riches as a god. The Greek word translated as "serve" really means "to be a slave of." For those greedy for material gain, money takes the place of God. Life revolves around having money. If money is the ultimate value, anything, and I do mean anything, can be justified in its pursuit.

In the wake of the Janet Jackson Super Bowl debacle, many people have asked how we as a

society could have stooped so low. I saw a TV special that asked that question and documented the evolution of our Super Bowl halftime shows.

At first, we had the standard high school and college marching bands. Then we had commercially produced specials with themes, like the birthday of Charlie Brown or Disney's electric parade. In the nineties we had shows by Michael Jackson and from that point on the halftime shows gradually became more risqué and offensive.

Why did that happen? One word answers it all, greed. The more shocking the show the more money they could make. It's just that simple. That shouldn't surprise us because greed is the number one idolatry in our land. Politicians use our greed to control us, and hucksters use our greed to fleece us.

Paul in many of his letters to the early Christian church talks about the idolatry of greed. And interestingly, in a number of references to idolatry and its evils he often associates the "greed of gain" or "covetousness," (a word that means literally "wanting more") with sexual immorality. If we accept greed as a god, this unrestrained "wanting more" becomes a way of life. According to Paul, all kinds of personal and social problems (such as jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, envy, and robbery) are a result of making greed into a god.

Paul saw greed as an evil so contrary to God's purpose for human life that he even went so far as to say that those who succumb to its lure "have no place in the kingdom of God." (See 1 Corinthians 6:10; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5) If you are struggling spiritually, I would suggest that you look here first. Have you succumbed to the idolatry of mammon? Is "wanting more" preventing you from fulfilling your true purpose in life?

POWER

Related to the idolatry of greed is another ancient and popular idolatry, the idolatry of power. If our personal financial welfare becomes the greatest good, then it is just a short step to saying that we must do whatever is necessary to preserve "our way of life." In the face of great danger, it is tempting to trust in military might and the strength of political leaders for protection and preservation.

But, throughout the Bible, God's people are warned not to trust in military might for security. For example, earlier in the book of Jeremiah (5:17) the prophet predicts that destruction will come upon the people despite their elaborate defenses. He wrote, "With the sword they will destroy the fortified cities in which you trust."

In a post 9-11 world that prophecy has more impact for many of us. Security is an elusive commodity. Elaborate defenses are no match for a determined terrorist who is willing to give his own life. He can strike anywhere, even in our greatest city.

But, we must take care that our legitimate fears about security do not lead us to trust in the wrong thing. Power politics and military might have taken center stage in our nation. But, quite frankly, I think our country would be safer if we would trust more in promoting justice and less in raw power.

There will always be a new threat in this dangerous world in which we live. But, quite often it is our attempt to keep ourselves safe by use of raw power that brings about even greater tragedy.

JOSIAH

According to one commentator, today's lesson from Jeremiah was written when Israel faced a terrible security crisis just after the reign of good King Josiah.

Josiah, unlike many before him, was a righteous king who brought back the worship of the one true God. He tore down the idols dedicated to Baal and Asherah. If there had been popularity polls in those days, his approval rating would have been in the ninety percent level. In the Bible we read this evaluation of his rule,

“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did, with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength.” (2 Kings 23:25)

But, as King Josiah led his people in battle against Pharaoh Neco, he was killed at the battle of Megiddo. The death of Josiah not only brought about a national crisis, it also brought about a crisis of faith. The people couldn't understand why something like this had happened to their king and country. Josiah was a good king. He trusted God. Why did this terrible tragedy happen? Why didn't God protect him?

Some wanted to take practical political steps to protect their country. Instead of trusting in God, these people wanted to make a political alliance with Egypt or Babylon. But, the prophet Jeremiah reminded the people their real hope lay not in political alliances or even in a popular and righteous leader. Their real hope lay in trusting God for deliverance.

Again, I think Peterson's dynamic translation of our passage for today really brings it to life. He translated verses 5 and 6 of our lesson,

5 GOD's Message:

"Cursed is the strong one
who depends on mere humans,
Who thinks he can make it on muscle alone
and sets GOD aside as dead weight.
6 He's like a tumbleweed on the prairie,
out of touch with the good earth.
He lives rootless and aimless
in a land where nothing grows.
(Jeremiah 17:5-6)

EXPECTING TOO MUCH OF LEADERS

When disaster threatens, it is only natural for people to turn to someone whom they perceive to be strong and has the “muscle” to get things done. It is only natural for people to look for a good leader, to find some human being who promises to deliver us from our woes.

But, that quest for the perfect leader is, in the long run, futile. Political and religious leaders have failed spectacularly in recent days. It has led to a great deal of cynicism and anger on the part of many people.

But, the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that this betrayal is inevitable. No human being is able to bear the weight of such responsibility. Those who trust in the power of human leaders and political alliances to bring us deliverance will ultimately be totally disappointed. Such alliances will leave us “rootless and aimless,” like tumbleweeds living on the prairie. Again, when we trust in human beings more than God we have committed the sin of idolatry.

I wonder sometimes if God didn't allow good king Josiah to be defeated because the people were putting too much trust in that particular human leader. And I wonder, when our leaders and friends and family disappoint us, if God is not trying to send us that same message as well.

No matter how good, no matter how kind, no matter how trustworthy they may be, human beings are not capable of giving us all that we need. And, if we act as if they are capable of that kind of help, we will destroy our leaders with expectations that are unrealistic.

A friend once wrote me of his disappointment with a church that he was serving. He said that all the people wanted him to "give, give, give all the time!" I took it from what he said and how he said it that he was running out of something to give!

This often happens to people who desire to be of help to others. They buy into the unrealistic expectation that they must be all things to all people. They give, give, give, and the result is burn out. Trusting completely in the ability of human beings to solve our problems is a sure recipe for disaster. One by one the sources of help disappear as we discover the weakness and frailty of human nature, and we end up feeling all alone, and helpless, very much like that tumbleweed on the prairie.

ELIJAH AND US

The imagery in this passage reminds me of the prophet Elijah who lost his nerve as he battled the evil queen Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. Jezebel threatened to have the prophet killed so he escaped into the desert. There he complained to the Lord, "I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Now, those of you who know the story remember that Elijah had experienced God's deliverance in a number of ways in the past. Among other things God had defeated the false prophets of Baal for him in a contest of faith, and he had been miraculously fed by God himself in a time of famine.

But, despite the many ways that God had delivered him in the past, Elijah's statement shows that he didn't completely trust God. He still had the feeling that he was going it alone, that his life was dried up and empty. He wanted someone to be on his side. He didn't want to be alone any more.

Elijah witnessed the power and salvation of God in overwhelming ways. But, his statement in the desert showed us that he still struggled to trust in God.

And I think that same struggle will always be with us as well. Despite the abundant evidence of God's grace toward us and despite his promises to care for us all the days of our life, sometimes we just have a hard time trusting God. Why? As we read in our lesson for today, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Medical science tells us one of the leading causes of death in North America is heart disease. In today's scripture reading Jeremiah suggests that the leading cause of spiritual death is the very same - our hearts are diseased.

We value the wrong things and we trust in the wrong things, and we hide the truth from ourselves. We think we trust in God alone, but in the time of testing we often we trust someone or something else.

Remember the actions of Jesus' disciples when the chips were down? They all protested their loyalty at the Last Supper, but they were not able to follow through on their promises.

One betrayed him. One denied him. They all abandoned him. I think that sometimes their story is our story. When the heat is on, we put our trust in someone or something other than God and God's promises.

In the face of a cross, we often run away too.

How do we face trials and dangers without running away from our Lord? By acknowledging our weakness and turning our life totally over to God.

LETTING GO

A man who loved the Lord was going through just such a time, experiencing deep and discouraging trials. His confidence in God was reaching a breaking point.

One day he went for a walk in the orchard with his small son. The boy wanted to climb an old apple tree, so the father patiently stood below watching as he went up the tree. But, many of the limbs were dead, and some of them began to break under the youngster's weight.

Seeing his son's trouble, the man held up his arms and said,
"Jump, Buddy, I'll catch you."

But, the boy still hung on. Just about that time another branch snapped and he cried out in fear,
"Shall I let go of everything, Daddy?"

"Yes"

Without hesitation, the boy jumped to safety into the strong, sure hands of his father.

Later the troubled man reflected upon this incident and realized that God was using it to speak to his heart. He was like his son, desperately trying to hold on to dead branches in a fearful and troubling time in his life.

But, what he needed to do was to let go and trust God completely for his deliverance. When we find ourselves in the desert, we need to find a source of water. And when we find ourselves in difficult times, we need to find Someone to catch us, One who can bring us living water that leads to eternal life. There is only one who can be trusted in life and in death. Peterson translates verses 7 and 8 of today's lesson.

[7] "But blessed is the man who trusts me, God,
the woman who sticks with God.

[8] They're like trees replanted in Eden,
putting down roots near the rivers—

Never a worry through the hottest of summers,
never dropping a leaf,

Serene and calm through droughts,
bearing fresh fruit every season.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 (MsgB)

Sometimes we can get so involved in doing what we think is important that we "give, give, give" as my minister friend put it, but we forget to take in. Remember, if we're going to give out, we have to take in. We need a life that is rooted in God and God alone.

An aviation cadet on a practice flight was suddenly stricken with blindness. Frantically, he contacted the control tower and told of his desperate plight. His commanding officer radioed back, "Don't be afraid, just do what I tell you!"

After being advised to keep circling the field until all was clear for a landing, the sightless pilot was instructed to begin losing altitude. As the aircraft approached the runway, the officer's voice called out encouragingly, "You're coming in right on target!"

And so the cadet, giving unquestioned obedience to his commander, brought the plane down safely.

It seems to me that this story is a perfect parable of what means to trust in God alone. All of us, in a sense are flying blind through life's dark way. We cannot know the future, and we are terribly distressed at times by our situation.

Yet, we are not alone. The Lord, through his Word and Spirit guides us every step of the way, in this life and the next.

In God we trust. It is not just a motto. It is the foundation for life. Amen.