

## ***Trust***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
Rincon United Church of Christ  
Tucson, Arizona  
July 11, 2010

*I can only fly freely  
when I know there is a catcher to catch me.  
If we are to take risks,  
to be free,  
in the air,  
in life,  
we have to know  
that when we come down from it all,  
we're going to be caught,  
we're going to be safe.  
The great hero is the least visible.  
Trust the catcher.* —Henri Nouwen

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

I remember when I was in youth group in my home church way back when. We would do an exercise in trust. Maybe you did this too. We would take turns falling backwards and having member of the group catch us before we hit the ground. We were trying to get at that aspect of faith where one overcome's one's fear to let go, to take a risk, to trust something or someone else. Almost all the time, this trust was well-place when it came to this exercise and nobody got hurt. But kid will be kids sometimes.

Today I want to talk about trust as a spiritual state. This is trust with a deep quality to it. That is, it points to an ultimate concern, the kind of trust that is at the root or the core of our existence.

Now, having said this, I need to add that this kind of trust is not fully achieved by us. We don't pretend to have arrived. So this is a community in which we are *learning* or *developing* or *practicing* this kind of trust.

I'm talking about a trust in God, the Holy Presence, the Sacred Reality, the unknowable, unfathomable, unnamable Mystery; that Loving Force, that Compassionate Intelligence in the universe.

It's a trust in Life itself—that our life is always precious and of incredible value. For when we trust in our own life process, when we embrace life and trust in the ultimate goodness of life—we trust God, the One who works in and through all the stuff of our lives. This is why *our trust in God is inseparable from our trust in life*.

A few years ago the papers carried a story of a man in Florida who sued his minister. The man had been in church one Sunday when the minister gave a sermon based on the passage in Ecclesiastes, “Cast your bread upon the waters” (Eccl. 11:1). The minister urged the congregation to be charitable and generous, telling them that God would reward them tenfold. So the man made a large contribution to the church, but when his business did not prosper he sued his minister for false preaching. (By the way, his case was thrown out of court and the man was told to take the sermons less literally.)

Now, the image of “casting your bread upon the water” is a great image of trust. For it meant placing your substance, your livelihood, your very life into the vast, deep unknown. It is an extreme, radical act of trust.

But what does it mean?

How is what I have to say about trust any different from what you will hear from most other pulpits? Here it is: Like that minister in Florida, many other pulpits will proclaim a trust in *results*. A true trust in God has *no idea* what it will receive in return. It cannot be quantified or measured.

A true trust in God, it seems to me, is not a belief that “everything’s going to be just fine.” Everything may not be just fine. In fact, everything may get even worse.

In the letter to the Hebrews, there is this famous definition of faith: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). But ironically, many translate this into a trust in things that *are* seen, touched and measured.

Now I want you to hear me on this. I am not suggesting that having a radical trust in God means that we don’t care about results. I am not suggesting some kind of cultish behavior when we succeed from the world, say, “check, please” or drink arsenic-laced kool-aid. I’m not suggesting this at all. But often the alternative to trusting in the results is a total retreat from the world.

But what you will hear from me is that trusting in the result and working for results are two different things. A radical trust in God means that we do work for certain things. We work for bread, for nourishment, for shelter, for material well-being, for saner and more compassionate political policies, for a just and fair social order. We work for many good, praiseworthy results. But that does not mean that we put our *trust* in them.

For as good as some of these results might be, when we put our trust in the results, we sometimes try to achieve them “by any means necessary.” Because we trust in our hoped-for results so deeply, we are tempted to justify violence, warfare, even torture; equivocating, dissembling, deceiving and lying.

A deep trust in God means that sometimes the *means* are even more important than the *ends*. Sometimes *how* we try to achieve results is more crucial than *what* we are trying to achieve.

There's a famous story about Martin Luther, one of the key founders of the Reformation. He was asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. His response was, "Plant a tree." In other words, he would continue to seek results. But if you knew Luther, you knew that the results were not where his ultimate trust was. Indeed, if your trust were in the results, you would give up if the world were about to end. Paradoxically, by not trusting in the results, it can enable you to work harder for them, to not give up.

In his *Confessions*, the early church theologian, Augustine, wrote about a voice speaking to him. It said,

*Why do you try to stand on your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God and have no fear. God will not shrink away and let you fall. Cast yourself upon God without fear, and God will welcome you and cure you of your ills.*

After hearing this voice, Augustine then wrote,

*It was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.*

This reminds me of a Zen proverb that also reflects this deep trust I am talking about:

*Jump, and the net will appear.*

Now, the "cure for our ills" of the "net that appears" *may not be what we expect*, but a deep trust believes it is there. We don't know what the net will look like, only that it will appear.

I like something that Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote about trusting beyond the results we seek:

*Heaven would mean realizing that our willingness to stand up for an unpopular cause many not have changed things in 1979, when we did it, but without our knowing it, will inspire other people to take similar stands in the year 2000. In the physical world, every time I wave my arm I set air in motion and the reverberations never stop. In the realm of the spirit, every time I dry a tear, hold someone's hand, cause a student's eyes to light up with understanding, I have set something in motion that will never stop.*

In other words, every act of obedience makes a contribution to the Realm of God; we become a part of the Sacred Reality, even if we cannot see the results in the physical realm. So we work for things that are seen, but we trust in things that aren't.

There's this great poem by the Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, known for his commitment to the poor and to justice. It's called, "Do Not Forget."

*In a fabulous  
necklace  
I had to admire  
the anonymous string  
by which the whole thing  
was strung together.*

Trust is for that which is not seen, that which is hidden from all but the spiritual eye, that which hold the whole thing together.

In our passage today, the Apostle Paul hears the voice of God, and the voice says,

*My grace is sufficient for you.*

What does this mean? That we will get the cure we expect, the results that we want? Well, one of the points that Paul makes is that God does not promise to shield us from pain. In fact, in a different letter Paul lists all sorts of bad things that faithful people experience: persecution, famine, nakedness, poverty, distress, even martyrdom. No, for Paul, God does not promise that these things will not happen. What God promises is *grace*. And this, says Paul, *is enough*. We trust *that grace is sufficient*.

But is it? If we were to face failure—at home, in health, with our job—would we be able to say with gratitude, “God’s grace is enough!” That is was deep trust is.

Susan Classen, a Mennonite volunteer worker in El Salvador, shared an embroidered banner with an image of an old tree stump with new shoots sprouting up with the Spanish words, “They yanked off our fruit. They cut off our branches. They burned our trunk. But they couldn’t destroy our roots.”

To trust in God is to grow our roots deeply, to tap into a hidden source of strength and peace and grace at the heart of life that cannot be destroyed.

And, you know, sometimes the roots grow deeper when times are hard, when the climate becomes harsh. Sometimes when we encounter our limitations, we are *pushed into trust*. Sometimes pain and suffering *lead us to a deepened trust*, knocking us off balance and allowing trust to emerge, shattering our self-sufficiency and point us to explore downward to seek the subterranean grace of God.

Look, this is the difference between our wishes and our hope. Our wishes, the results we seek, may be very good—things like an end to hunger, racism, homeless, war, and crime. We wish for safety for the planet, an end to pollution, obscene consumption, global warming, stopping CO emissions before the balance of life is thrown into an irreversible tailspin. We wish to be more loving and compassionate people. We wish for a more inclusive church and society.

But my *hope* is not in these; my *trust* is not in these. What is *sufficient*, what is *unstoppable* is God's grace.

Kathleen Fischer in her book, *Winter Grace*, wrote,

*The Christian's final hope is based on communion, a union, with God that is indestructible...All our smaller hopes are drawn from this one large hope.*

So as we seek this singular hope,  
 instead of belief, may we focus on trust,  
 instead of understanding, may we focus on the peace beyond all understanding,  
 instead of doctrine, may we focus on Mystery, and  
 instead of results, may we focus on faith in the unseen.

And this kind of trust leads to a life of peace, joy, courage and freedom. As Henri Nouwen wrote,

*I can only fly freely  
 when I know there is a catcher to catch me.  
 If we are to take risks,  
 to be free,  
 in the air,  
 in life,  
 we have to know  
 that when we come down from it all,  
 we're going to be caught,  
 we're going to be safe.  
 The great hero is the least visible.  
 Trust the catcher.*

Trust the catcher. Do we ever fully achieve this, finally? No. We are all on a continual journey.

May this be a place where we learn and develop this kind of deep trust—continually. And may we practice every day living in the sufficiency of grace. This is a place not for easy answers but a place to develop our root system. And may we be able to say, as Paul wrote about some early followers who faced hard times:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;  
 perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
 persecuted, but not forgotten;  
 struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:8-9)*