

Covenant Word

A Matter of Trust

Numbers 11:24-30; I Corinthians 12:4-13; John 20:19-23

*A Message by
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Formation
Pentecost Sunday
June 4, 2017*

There's no other way to be happy in Jesus, the gospel hymn writer tells us than to 1) trust; and 2) obey. Oh dear. I may be in trouble. Are you? Obedience is hard enough, but trust?

Brad Hadaway was a camp pastor for a youth camp I worked for in seminary. One summer, he preached a sermon every week that involved an exercise in trust.

He would call a camper up on the stage to demonstrate a trust-fall. He would talk them through the motions of falling back into his ready-position. They would practice the verbal commands. The person doing the fall would always initiate with, "Ready?"

"Ready." Brad would answer.

"Falling," they would say.

"Fall" Brad would respond.

They would perform the "fall" before the audience of hundreds of over stimulated teenagers and adults.

For part II of the trust fall, the camper would be blindfolded and asked to try it again. Usually the camper had gained enough trust in Brad's tall frame to support their weight, that even blindfolded, they would fall back without hesitating. But for part III of the exercise, Brad would move around to the front of the camper, who was still blindfolded, and give the trust-fall commands. Hearing his voice now coming from in front of them, brought confusion, paranoia (was this all just going to be an embarrassing trick?). They were not usually willing to simply fall back at his command. So, he would assure them, "You can trust me. C'mon. Would I let you fall? You can trust me."

The teenage audience could see something that the blind-folded, young camper could not. As Brad moved out from behind the camper,

another burley camp-staff person silently moved into his place and took the ready-position for the camper to safely fall backwards. Would this young person fall back, trusting the one who had caught them already, but whose voice now tested their trust? Hundreds of witnesses that day saw their peer's trust put to the test.

Recently, Barbara Brown Taylor made her last presentation to the Festival of Homiletics. This live memoir narrated her journeys from certainties to questions, from assertions to wonder, from confidences to humility, reminding those listening – mostly preachers -- that as soon as we find ourselves settled, assured, certain in our preaching, teaching, believing, the Holy Spirit will come alongside us and whisper us forward (K. Lewis).

Taylor's witness to the work of the Spirit in her own life feels like the right message for us on Pentecost Sunday. Today's scripture texts testify to the fact that, as Taylor said, "the Holy Spirit is something we trust, not something we understand."

We have heard the accounts of Moses, John, and Paul, who are all witnesses to the work of the Spirit... and who trust in the Spirit to do some rather astonishing things.

Would this young person fall back, trusting the one who had caught them already, but whose voice now tested their trust?

In Numbers 11, Moses called upon God for help with the overwhelming demands of leading the Israelites. Accepting Moses' grievance as legit, for God is well-aware of the Israelites' whiny oneriness, God responds (not with a reprimand, but) with an outpouring of Spirit. The Hebrew word for Spirit is Ruah, a feminine word, that means both "spirit" and "wind." Moses is a witness to this dual meaning in the two actions of God in chapter 11. Spirit pours out upon the elders who are gathered outside the Tent of meeting and they immediately prophesy. Even two who were out taking a smoke-break did not escape the gifts of the Spirit and also found themselves suddenly prophesying right where they were. When Moses' assistant, Joshua, heard the prophesying, he called on Moses to put a stop this holy-rolling and to reclaim all authority back unto himself. But Moses assured Joshua that he welcomed the wind of God's spirit to blow



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among the seventy elders and anyone else it would. The character of Moses' servant-leadership and the way Spirit gives her gifts equally to all are in perfect sync. Moses sought to share authority and receive wisdom from people of the spirit even from among those outside the sanctioned and appointed seventy elders. After all, prophets like Amos and Jeremiah spoke a true word of God from the margins of their societies. Because that's where you'll find Spirit at work. Barbara Brown Taylor said "We don't keep the Spirit of life in the back room because she's shy but because she's dangerous."

Whatever Spirit is doing, it will not be characterized by tidiness. When you are looking for the Spirit's gifts, look for a bit of a mess. The Corinthian church is such a place. Like the bedroom of a preteen, there was evidence of varied interests strewn across the floor and rivaling for most prized possession! Paul is a witness to the Corinthians' enthusiasm for giftedness! One writer said "they had swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all." (See!) But they were not treating gifts or the gift-ed equally. Instead they seem enthralled by the more dramatic external manifestations of the Spirit's work – the "show-off" gifts (speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc). At the same time, they ignored the quieter works of Spirit that are also essential for building up the community. So, Paul, urges the Corinthians to do everything "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40), but this request does not preclude an eclectic palette of colorful gifts. It does warrant an equal manifestation of the Spirit for the common good, however (12:7). Paul directs the Corinthians to the "still more excellent way" of faith, hope,

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and love because that way will bring them back to valuing one another more than their own knowledge, or wisdom, or miracles, or prophecy. Paul's goal was not a tidy community but a loving one. The person sitting beside you in the pew or the one kneeling at the altar rail: that person matters far more than all the giftedness in a congregation. (M. H. Shore).

It is a beautiful thing to belong to a body of believers who already value one another over any contribution we individually make to this body. Kelly Mitchell wrote this about you, "[We are] a congregation of very gifted

Spirit will overturn structures that are used for the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. She will invite us to trust in a better way that includes the formerly excluded. She will invite us to lean into uncertainty and questions. She invites us to risk; because when we do, we find we need more of each other and more of Her.

individuals. It is our responsibility to help each other nurture these gifts. Alone the gifts can't accomplish all that God has in store for us, but by combining our gifts, we can truly allow the Holy Spirit to do great wonders through us."

"Great wonders." John, Paul and Moses all trusted in the Spirit to do some rather amazing things, even astonishing things. Because they had been witnesses to it! Do we? Do we

recognize these amazing acts of the Spirit in our own lives? Or are we indifferent – unable to recognize that the messiness of life is actually the place where Spirit is blowing its wind. Can we lean not on our own understanding, as the Proverb states, and trust in the Lord with all our hearts that the Holy spirit is at work, perhaps when, where and whether we recognize it or not?

Circumstances befall us that we do not like, that cause us pain or that bring upheaval to our well-ordered lives. Things happen that we can't explain or understand – for good and for bad.

Kendall Rae Rothaus, a powerful female preacher in the Alliance of Baptists movement, wrote, "Trust is crucial to the art of living. Without trust, your life's got no spirit, no wind, no oomph, nothing bigger than you at play, no guidance. Trust is not an easy thing, but it is entirely necessary for the life and health of a faith community; and its leaders; and its ministers."

Some of us might confess that we believe Spirit has better things to do than show up in our own lives. Even disruption may be a valid and necessary manifestation of Spirit to wake us up. The work of Spirit may not be something we understand, but these witnesses in today's scripture show us what She is capable of. It doesn't matter if we accept it or understand it. Three witnesses in scripture today tell us we can put our trust in a Spirit that is at work all around us in the sharing of gifts, in shared leadership, in

voices that speak with truth and authority even from the fringes of a community. Spirit will overturn our expectations and barge in with more creativity, more song, more beauty, more purpose, and more ideas. Spirit will overturn structures that are used for the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. She will invite us to trust in a better way that includes the formerly excluded. She will invite us to lean into uncertainty and questions. She invites us to risk; because when we do, we find we need more of each other and more of Her.

This is a good place for you to hear what else Kelly said, “I need to let go of the idea that I have to do everything on my own. I must learn to depend more on other members of our church to help me in areas where I am not gifted or wise, and I hope I can help others do the same.” (K. Mitchell)

On that warm summer night at youth camp, that kid stood there, trembling, and wondering if it would be safe to trust the person who now stood right in their face. Could they fall back and trust Brad, or something, to catch them? Brad whispered them forward, “You can’t see me. You may not understand how, but you can trust me. I won’t let you fall.”

Like the disciples who were close enough to feel Jesus breath on their faces, would they be able to leave the safety of their upper room? Would they be able to trust that a mighty Spirit would guide them into the days ahead?

This young kid nervously began the words they had practiced, “Ready?”

“Ready,” Brad said.

“Falling.”

Fall.

We can accomplish Great Wonders, but it will be a matter of trust... in one another and in God’s spirit among us.