

Sola Fidei: Trust

From the series: New Wine for Century 21

Text: Psalm 16:8; Romans 8:38-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

All of those wonderful children that emptied out of here a few minutes ago are God's great gift, and one of the greatest gifts that we can give to them is to create in our homes and in our faith community the kind of environment that will build within them fundamental trust. Fundamental trust has been defined by the developmental psychologist Erik Erickson as that total orientation of life that views all of reality in a positive fashion so that one can live almost instinctively, trustfully. And I say that, not because fundamental trust is a religious category, it's a general human capability or possibility, but I say this on the final week of our *Sola* series, "*Sola Fidei: Trust*," because trust, while it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, is a gift of faith. The kind of trust beyond fundamental trust that gives us that consciousness of relationship to God is a gift from God, but received with such difficulty if our lives are not oriented to be trustful.

I think, for example, of Martin Luther, whose name is synonymous with justification through faith, who recognized that the whole of the Gospel was with the open hand of faith to receive the gift of God, the gift of God's grace. But I think of Luther, whose name is synonymous with that great theme, but who had such a terrible struggle in his own life. We heard the story. I referred to it in the previous weeks, but let me remind you again of how Luther's God was not a gracious and loving God, but in his mind, an angry God. And in all of his seriousness he struggled with a terrible torment of his conscience as he went through his religious exercises, trying to appease the demons that assaulted him, failing to find a resting place, blessed assurance eluding him at every turn; finding himself absolutely miserable to the point of his frustration, as I said last week, when he said, "Love God? I don't love God. I hate God."

Luther, thank God, is an example of one who in adulthood broke through by the miracle of grace by the inspiration of God's Spirit, and was able in his adulthood to come to that place of trust. But it's so very difficult to do it that way. It's so much easier if we have been nurtured in an environment that has led us to trust instinctively out of the depths of our being. Thank God if that has been our experience. The spirit of God can create that faith and trust in us so that no one is

a hopeless case, no one need despair. But how much better it is if we can come to that trust almost as a flower opening to the rays of the sun, than through the anguish and the crisis through which a Luther had to go.

He came to great clarity, however, and out of his great clarity, the whole Reformation, the whole Protestant Christian faith understanding was shaped and formed. Listen to his words, which express that to which he was able, finally, to come by the grace of God. He said,

This is the reason our theology is certain. It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person or works, but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God which cannot deceive.

You see, he got the focus out of himself; he got his obsession with his own doings loosened and he came to realize that it was not through his performance, but it was through that which God had done for him, but apart from him. He did learn to cast himself and rest himself on the good and gracious God Who was revealed in Jesus Christ, and not the high and mighty God. He said in his very earthy fashion,

"Don't climb up to the heights of heaven, to the majesty of God, and don't bother with all of the philosophical and theoretical speculations about God. If you would know God, go to the crib that holds a child. Go to the mother at whose breast a child is nursed. Go to the cross at which that one suffers and dies. There you'll find the gracious God.

Thank God he came to that peace. He learned to trust and, out of his experience, down through the centuries since that Reformation of the Church, we have sung the song, "*Sola Fidei*: by faith, through faith alone," the hallmark of our Reformation Christian faith.

I don't think that many of us know the anguish that Luther knew, and I doubt that many of us struggle to the extent that he struggled with the sinful conscience that he felt was resting under the wrath of God. I think that was part of his own setting, his own environment, maybe his inability to trust early on was reflective of his very early experience. Whatever that may be (sometimes it can just be the genetic makeup; some of us trust more easily than others), but, whatever that may be, he came to trust. But I think not many of us will come the way he came, struggling with that particular question of our sin and our guilt and our fear of an angry God. And yet I think that all of us have those moments when we wonder about the meaning of life and we struggle with the mystery of life.

I was reminded, reflecting on all of this, of when I went to the University of Michigan in 1983. I was there that fall term and Hans Küng was the guest. He gave lectures that were subsequently published under the title, "Eternal Life?"

And here was a Roman Catholic theologian who was dealing with the end questions, the existential questions of death, of heaven, of hell, of purgatory. I couldn't believe it! The University of Michigan is not much into religion, having only a half-time program in studies in religion. A great, secular, educational institution, but very little regard to the whole dimension of religious faith. But they brought in Hans Küng, and during that term he spoke on these questions that I had not preached on because I didn't know how to handle them in the pulpit. I wasn't satisfied with the pat answers about heaven and hell and purgatory and death, and what a preacher does, when a preacher doesn't know how to handle it, is simply not to handle it. And, frankly, I was embarrassed. Here, in the middle of that secular campus, this man stood up and spoke about heaven and hell and purgatory, grace, death, life.

It was a wake-up call for me because those lectures were attended by overflow crowds - the university crowd, the community crowd, standing room only, and I thought, "Dear God, people may be highly educated, sophisticated, quite secular in their whole life, unaffiliated with the institutional structures of the Church, but they're all going to die. They all have questions, and they have loved ones who die, and they wonder." And from that point on, you've heard a great deal about life and death and grace and that which lies beyond, because I came to see that it is in the moment of our death that we encounter God.

It was the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth and there was a weeklong conference of international scholars gathered there to celebrate the birth of Martin Luther. Ironically, it was Luther, whose attack on the Church was at the point of indulgences and all of the apparatus used so abusively surrounding purgatory that made it for us a non-subject. Yet, it was at that time from this Catholic scholar, Hans Küng, who spoke about Luther in a magnificent lecture, affirming justification by faith, who also caused me to go back and think about Purgatory. What was in the mind of the Church that said maybe everything is not all over at the point of death. Maybe God is not done with us at the moment of our death. Maybe the moment of our death will be the moment of illumination and the beginning of purification and the preparing of us for further in and farther up and the shining presence. And from this Catholic theologian, as he spoke about Luther, I heard these words:

To believe in an eternal life means in reasonable trust, in enlightened faith in tried and tested hope, to rely on the fact that I shall one day be fully understood, freed from guilt and definitively accepted and can be myself without fear.

(Is that beautiful? To believe in eternal life means with reasonable trust, enlightened faith, tried and tested hope, to rely on the fact that I shall one day be fully understood, freed from guilt and definitively accepted. Would not Martin Luther affirm his brother priest 500 years later? It would be hard to say it more clearly, more fundamentally.)

That my impenetrable and ambivalent existence, like the profoundly discordant history of humanity as a whole, will one day become finally transparent and the question of the meaning of history one day be finally answered.

My impenetrable and ambivalent existence. I don't think so many of us will struggle just where Luther struggled, but don't we all yearn to understand, to penetrate the mystery? Do we not experience our ambivalence, the equivocation of our lives? Do we not wonder why and wherefore and whence for ourselves and for those we've loved and lost a while? And to be able to trust that I, personally, will be definitively accepted – to that, Luther would say, yes, yes. Because of that which has been done for me, apart from me, that which God has revealed to me in Jesus Christ, that heart of God that I see in the face of Jesus - that I can trust. And also for those I love and lose, that they, too, in the mystery that surrounds their going, whether it be the normal passage after many years or the tragic loss too soon, that this impenetrable mystery of ourselves and this discordant history of humanity as a whole will one day be transparent. To be able to live thus is to trust.

As the Psalmist expressed: "I have set the Lord always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." And a little farther on – "Not now the Lord before me, but I in the presence of the Lord. Thou wilt show me the path of life. At Thy right hand are pleasures forevermore." In the presence. In the presence. God at my right hand; I in the presence of God. For the Psalmist, all within this present existence, but for the apostle Paul, more than that. For he, too, spoke out of that deep confidence. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" "What can separate us from the love of Christ?"

Well, any number of things, Paul. Famine or nakedness or peril or sword or cancer or tragic loss or deep suffering. No, Paul said. No. No, no, no. To all of that I must say, Nevertheless. "Nothing in this life, nothing in death, nothing in the whole creation will ever sever us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." That's to live trustingly, you see

Ah, it helps so much if, as a child, we have been nurtured even from the womb to experience the totality of things with a positive regard. But even if not, here and there, now and again, like a Luther, the Word finds rootage, the Spirit opens the mind and, with a Luther, we can say it was as though the gates of paradise were opened. Or, with a John Wesley hearing the same word and the testimony of Luther can say, "I found my heart strangely warmed." And then we can negotiate life's passages, trustingly, and we can face our end trustingly, and we can let go of those we loved and lost trustingly, for beyond it all, behind it all, underneath it all is that understanding of God full of grace, God, the abyss of love, and the conviction that nothing of love will ever be lost. That, therefore, for ourselves and those we've loved and lost, it will be like

Stepping on shore and finding it heaven, like touching a hand and finding it God's, like breathing new air and finding it celestial, like waking up in glory and finding it home.

Believe that. You can trust that, and you will be wonderfully free.