

Confidence

Scripture: Isaiah 54:1-10; Philippians 1:1-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Confidence is a very common word used to describe the level of trust one has in oneself, in another, in the truth of a claim or reality of a situation. The word, as so many words in our English vocabulary, stems from the Latin: The prefix *con*, meaning *with* and *fidere* meaning *trust*. To live with confidence is to live with trust.

Trust in what?

A variety of answers are possible.

One may have self-confidence in regard to one's ability to perform one's task or to negotiate some difficult feat. One may have confidence in one's favorite team. In Green Bay, confidence runs high in the Packers only one week away from America's Holy Sunday. One may have confidence in the people with whom one works, one's spouse, one's family. Obviously, one may have confidence in the goodness and mercy of God.

But I want us to think about confidence more generally today at the top of another year. I want to think about confidence as a fundamental attitude over against the whole of one's life, life itself and the attitude we share together as a faith community.

Those who study human development point to the critical importance of fundamental trust as the foundation for a healthy adjustment to life. Trust not with a specific object attached to it, but trust as a basic orientation to life and reality. Studies in child development tell us nothing is more important for the nurturing of an infant through the earliest experience than the creation of a secure and loving environment in which the infant, the child, learns to trust.

We know it is so. We know it is true for ourselves and we see it borne out in those around us. Healthy, whole, fruitful, productive people are marked by confidence; they live with trust.

Where does it come from?

If one learns very early to trust or not, it must be passed on from generation to generation. But, where did it begin and on what is it based?

Certainly trust in life's goodness and ultimate meaningfulness is not obvious from simple observation of the human experience. Life is fragile, full of peril, haunted by tragedy. Experience is mixed. When one stops to think about it, trust cannot rise from experience. Concrete experience can often be the acid that eats away at trust. As I said at Christmas, children love fairy tales because, while filled with danger and darkness, things turn out all right and the good folk live happily ever after. But, it is not so in life - any honest appraisal will in the end reveal human experience as mixed.

Still, there is something in us that goes on, picks up again, trusts again. And this is true of religious people and those who practice no religious faith consciously. Let me suggest that for the religious consciously and the non-religious unconsciously, confidence is rooted in trust in the goodness and mercy of God - that at the heart and center of reality is God Who is for us, for life.

Let me point you to the morning lessons which speak of confidence rooted in God.

Second Isaiah, as we call the unknown prophet of chapters 40-55, sings of an eternal covenant of peace to the exiles of Judah living in Babylon. They were on the edge of despair thinking their God of covenant, Yahweh, had abandoned them, or had been overruled by the gods of the mighty Babylonian Empire. But the prophet begins to preach to them, interprets their experience and tells them stories of their past and encourages them to trust that God will yet deliver them.

They will go home!

He begins the poem recorded in chapter 54 with a call to the barren one to sing; she who was barren will birth many children. Therefore, the tent must be enlarged, the curtains stretched out, the stakes strengthened, the cords lengthened, for "You will spread out."

The allusion to the barren woman would not be lost on these exiles. Who was the classic barren one in Israel's past? Sarah, of course.

You have heard me claim many times that Genesis 11:30 is a critical watershed in the biblical narrative. The first eleven chapters of Genesis record the repeated failure of humankind to live into the intention of the Creator and then God tries a new strategy - choosing one family in order to bless eventually all families of the earth. And how does God begin?

With Sarah, who is barren.

And not only Sarah, but Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah. The prophet of the exiles played on the memory of his people to remind them that precisely in barrenness, God acts to effect fruitfulness.

And then, if that is not enough to trigger the rebirth of trust, he reminds them in verse nine of Noah. Out of the devastation of the Flood, God placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of God's promise that never again would the earth be destroyed. God's faithfulness to Creation was signed with the rainbow. The Covenant with Noah preceded the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. With Abraham and Sarah, God sealed a Covenant of Grace with a particular family with the intention of reaching all families, but with Noah, the covenant promise embraced the whole Creation.

Would not that story remind Israel that Yahweh was no tribal deity limited to their homeland, but the One Eternal God, Creator of all?

Stories. They are the stuff of human confidence. When trust wears thin, we tell a story of what God has done and we find our confidence renewed that God will give us a future.

Stories of faith. Remember and trust; trust God.

Paul was a son of Israel and when he experienced the blinding vision on the Road to Damascus, he came to believe Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the anointed one through whom God was effecting that universal intention of the covenant of Grace sealed with Abraham and Sarah.

We noted that last week; the secret hidden long ages with God was now being manifest. Paul was amazed and transformed. Now there would be no longer, as he wrote to the Galatians, *Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female*, but all one in Christ Jesus. And, he adds, if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

No more barriers dividing humankind;

No more hostility,

No more outsiders and insiders.

Thus transformed, the former persecutor of the people of the Way became the passionate Apostle of grace, the grace of God that is as wide as the whole human family.

One of the ancient cities to which he took the story of God's grace was Philippi, where a congregation was formed, a community with whom Paul had his most intimate relationship. There was a deep love affair between Paul and the Philippian congregation as is evident from his letter to that church.

That letter begins with a rather extended thanksgiving - thanksgiving to God for this people who had stayed in touch with him and provided for his needs. Now in prison awaiting trial in the Imperial Court of Rome, Paul writes to express his deep affection for this people who joined him in a partnership in the Gospel. And in the midst of his expression of gratitude, he writes,

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Here the confidence has a specific object - that the work of grace begun among this people by God will be brought to completion. That confidence is, however, based on Paul's fundamental trust in God - the God of the beginning is the God Who will be at the ending.

Once again we find that Paul's specific confidence is rooted in that basic confidence in God. Paul's confidence was not based on experience; he was in prison. He would die for his faith. But, the particular circumstance did not dislodge Paul's confidence. Indeed, he writes, the circumstance of imprisonment had actually resulted in an increase in the witness to the Gospel.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.

The Imperial Guard received Paul's witness; others gained confidence through Paul's imprisonment and bore their witness with greater boldness, and even, what might have defeated a lesser person, some took advantage of Paul's imprisonment to further their own rival point of view. But, says Paul, so what?

*Christ is preached.
I rejoice.*

What lies behind this remarkable grace? Is it not Paul's confidence that God is at work in what seems the most adverse circumstances?

Confidence - a very great gift; a healthy way to live and engage life. Living with such trust, Paul rested easily. This restless, passionate Apostle who traveled the ancient world as a man with a mission of eternal significance found inner serenity as he contemplated the turn of events because, through it all, he trusted God. That was the bedrock of his life.

Telling Paul's story does for me what the prophet telling the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Noah did for the exiles in Babylon. Faith is renewed, trust restored when we remember - remember the stories of those who have gone on before us.

There was a lovely celebration here last Sunday. There was joy. We have been through deep waters, but can we not say with Paul that what has happened to us has actually resulted in the furtherance of this work of grace? Is that not the

wonder of it all - that the challenge and the struggle have positioned us with new freedom and joy to find our way to the embodiment of God's grace here for the healing of persons?

I could go back over the years to the times this text has been used here - watershed moments when we were challenged to move out in a new dimension of faith. Always the ground was the God Who has begun a good work here and surely will not let it languish, but will bring it to completion.

Confidence. It is a gift. It is the way to live freely, fruitfully, because it is a life rooted in God and the trust that God is for us. God will go with us, will keep us and will finally bring us home.

All will be well. You can trust that, not because things work out, but because God is God.