

February 17, 2019, "Like a Tree Planted by the Water", Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson
Luke 6:17-26 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground. A great company of his disciples and a huge crowd of people from all around Judea and Jerusalem and the area around Tyre and Sidon joined him there. They came to hear him and to be healed from their diseases, and those bothered by unclean spirits were healed. The whole crowd wanted to touch him, because power was going out from him and he was healing everyone.

Jesus raised his eyes to his disciples and said:

“Happy are you who are poor,
because God’s kingdom is yours.

Happy are you who hunger now,
because you will be satisfied.

Happy are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.

Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and condemn your name as evil because of the Human One.

Rejoice when that happens!

Leap for joy because you have a great reward in heaven.

Their ancestors did the same things to the prophets.

But how terrible for you who are rich,
because you have already received your comfort.

How terrible for you who have plenty now,
because you will be hungry.

How terrible for you who laugh now,
because you will mourn and weep.
How terrible for you when all speak well of you.
Their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets.

Jeremiah 17:5-8 Common English Bible (CEB)

The Lord proclaims:

Cursed are those who trust in mere humans,
who depend on human strength
and turn their hearts from the Lord.

They will be like a desert shrub
that doesn't know when relief comes.

They will live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in a barren land where no one survives.

Happy are those who trust in the Lord,
who rely on the Lord.

They will be like trees planted by the streams,
whose roots reach down to the water.

They won't fear drought when it comes;
their leaves will remain green.

They won't be anxious in the time of drought
or fail to bear fruit.

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy are those who trust in the Lord. I don't know about you, but trust comes hard for me. Perhaps it's because as a young child, I was the translator for my parents -- the one who, literally, helped them understand what was going on around them. Perhaps it is because I moved around so much and had to learn how to rely on myself to make friends, figure out a new school system, take care of myself. Perhaps it is because of how much our culture values independence and self-sufficiency -- something that I, as a young woman wanting to succeed in America, have taken to heart. Do it for yourself. Do not rely on other people. Do not trust that others can or will do it for you or do it as well as you can do it for yourself. Whatever the reason, trust is not one of my spiritual gifts -- I have to work at it.

Perhaps you can relate. The older I get, the more I realize how flawed this approach to life is. The more I realize how impoverished an approach to relationship and community this is. The more I realize how unfaithful an approach to God. Because, let's be honest -- having trouble trusting other people makes it harder, not easier, for me to trust God.

And then I hear those words of Jeremiah, cursed are those who trust in mere humans, who depend on human strength and turn their hearts from the Lord. They will be like a desert shrub.

The truth is that most of us experience some sort of wilderness during our lives. Most of us know something of what it is like to be a desert shrub -- not knowing relief when it comes. Most of us know what it is like to live in the parched places of wilderness, in a barren land where no one survives. Most of us know those places of drought and fear, loneliness, grief, and even despair:

We know addiction -- our own and that of people we love;

We know exhaustion -- the feeling of being stretched too thin between the demands of work and family. We value busy-ness to the point of simply being tired all the time;

We know mental health struggles, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, the struggle of living with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia;

Or physical health struggles: chronic pain, injuries, progressive illnesses;

We know what it is like to be misunderstood or simply not seen -- whether because of our heritage, our race, our learning styles, our religious beliefs or our questions, who we love, how much money we have, our gender, our citizenship status, our age or our youth, our taste in music or lifestyle or clothing;

We know abuse -- verbal, physical or sexual; we know violence of all kinds;

We know the wilderness of shame and bitterness, disappointment and regret, self-criticism and resentment;

Most of us have some experience of being an outsider, or fear of becoming one, of being cast out from the social center and left to fend for ourselves on the edges.

So some of us choose the edges.

Some of us choose to go it alone instead of risking that we might be rejected. Again.

Yes, we know the parched places of wilderness. We know barren lands.

But, Jeremiah has good news for us, too. See, the antidote to living in the parched places, the antidote to struggling to survive in barren lands is to trust in God.

Those who put their trust in God will be like the trees planted by the streams, whose roots reach down to the water. They won't fear drought when it comes; their leaves will remain green. They won't be anxious in the time of drought or fail to bear fruit.

Trusting God -- easier said than done, right?

Especially for those of us who have gotten so very good at practicing self-sufficiency.

Especially for those of us whose lives offer the comfortable and seductive deception that we CAN indeed go it alone.

Especially for those of us who have learned to value independence to the point of forgetting that we need each other, that we need God.

What does it even mean to trust God, anyway?

Practically. In our lives.

What does it look like to trust God?

Trusting God means praying -- sure! Yes! More prayer. Trusting God definitely means praying. It means **listening and paying attention**. And this means pausing, resting, cultivating some quiet in our lives so that we can hear over the din of our busy schedules.

Praying also means being willing to share ourselves with God -- even though God already knows it all -- being willing to give of ourselves, to intentionally place ourselves at God's feet.

Trusting God means confessing our sins -- confessing our vulnerability, our limits, our short-comings, our mistakes.

It means taking responsibility for our actions and not just our intentions but also the impact of our actions.

Trusting God means confessing the ways that we are seduced by power and prestige, fame and financial abundance, by our own desire to be comfortable over our longing for a world where all have enough.

Trusting God means confessing that we fall short of our own hopes and dreams and wishes -- for how to care for the environment, for how to care for each other, for how to care for ourselves, for how to live faithfully in this world.

Trusting God also means confessing our faith -- confessing our awe and wonder at creation, confessing our gratitude for people, place and opportunity, confessing our need of love -- more love -- in our lives, confessing our longing for home and belonging, confessing our hope for God's beloved community and our commitment to building that community together.

Trusting God means risking -- as we talked about last week. It means venturing back out into the deep. It means casting those nets again.

It means having the hard conversation. Even when we know it will make us uncomfortable. Having that hard conversation means risking listening to another person's point of view, risking opening ourselves to make room for another perspective, risking asking questions that we fear will make us look uninformed or uncaring, risking that a different viewpoint may change us.

Having hard conversations also means risking sharing of ourselves -- being honest about what we believe, risking that we may offend or that others may disagree with us, or

even think less of us because of what we believe.

Trusting God means risking -- it means taking action when what we'd rather do is... Anything else! Yes, we pray. Yes, we confess. And God calls us beyond that -- God calls us to action. And the thing is, the reality is, when we open our hearts to God's call, when we open ourselves to God's love, we can't help but act. The person who trusts in God is like the tree planted beside the water, that bears fruit even in the drought. Our action is that fruit -- it comes naturally when we are deeply grounded and rooted in God.

And trusting God means changing -- opening ourselves up knowing that we cannot remain the same. We cannot continue to protect the parched places within us or the barren land, but instead, we must venture from that place to somewhere new. And goodness, is this a scary thing!

Trusting God means that when we are afraid, when we are anxious, when we are stressed, we take a look at our lives. Fear, anxiety, stress -- these are all indicators, these are all flags, inviting us to practice trust, to let go, to rest, to ask for help, to seek perspective, to get curious, to invite God in.

The good news, friends, is that we know how to trust -- to pray and confess, to risk and to change. Indeed, the Bible is a love story all about Trust.

And this church's history also bears out the story of trust. Our forebears -- the people who helped dig the foundations of this church walked this walk! In the late 1700s, they pulled up their roots in Germany to settle in southeast Russia near the Volga River. A hundred years later, when their language, their values and their freedom of religion were being threatened, when their sons and brothers and husbands were being drafted into military service, when famine and disease and violence threatened their way of life, the Volga Germans picked up again. They picked up and fled to the Americas, to the promise of new opportunities, a better life for their families and freedom of religion -- I daresay, desires that still hold sway for refugees and immigrants the world over today.

To quote some of our church's historic documents, those Volga German forebears brought with them their language, their habits of thrift, industry and honesty, and also their desire for religious freedom. I daresay, they prayed, confessed, and risked their way across the ocean. And they continued to embrace change for themselves and their families once they had settled here and formed this church.

As written in the booklet for the 50th anniversary celebration of our building: "The First Congregational Church is a church [that] provides the widest liberty in the matter of

doctrine and policy, [and whose] creeds are not necessarily binding and its platforms have been open to change.” Open to Change!

I would say these things are still true of us as a congregation. Why? Because we choose to trust. Why? Because we are working to notice those places where we feel anxiety and fear and to explore how we might invite God in, to explore what it might look like to trust.

As the Rev. Jonathan Winans (our minister during the 2001 Centennial celebration of the church) advised, we continue to hold before us who we are and whose we are. And I quote:

“As we stand at this crossroads, standing firm on the foundation of our past and looking to the future, we need to be mindful of who we are, so that we know where and why we are moving. We are children of God, on an ever-present journey. A journey of being faithful to God’s calling.”

How many crossroads we face -- as individuals, as a church family, as a nation and indeed as a world. How many times we face choices and transitions -- to stay the same, to remain in places that perhaps were once fertile and fruitful but that have become parched and barren, or to move, to change, to seek once again the streams by which we can plant our roots.

Friends, let us choose trust. Vulnerable, prayerful, confessional, risky and transformative trust. Let us practice, in ways small and large, personally and communally. Let us practice knowing that sometimes we will falter, sometimes we will fail, sometimes we will experience hurt and loss. But knowing that ultimately God promises life, life abundant, exuberant and wonder-filled. God promises life -- not the life that is perfectly comfortable or without struggle, tragedy or pain, but the life that stands in the face of all of that and continues to love and to forgive and to give thanks. May it be so. Amen.