

6 Epiphany Yr C, 13/02/2022
Jer 17:5-10
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Trust in the LORD”

According to Paul Tournier, The lure of magic is in the first place the temptation to follow false gods, to deify creatures in the place of God the Creator. We are constantly coming upon examples of it in medical practice. It happens in every case of ‘mother fixation’, in which the infant’s deification of the mother is prolonged into adult life. Many men deify their wives, and vice versa. We very often meet cases where parents have made a god of their child—to her or his harm, as well as their own, you may be sure.

We see eminent men and women deifying a master, slavishly accepting all his or her ideas.¹ In today’s passage from Jeremiah, the prophet condemns all those who fall into the sin of idolatry—of deifying human beings, trusting in human beings rather than trusting in God.

The people of Judah had, in addition to the LORD God, believed in and trusted in a variety of false gods. They had made idols out of stone and wood, and worshipped them. They had trusted more in their shrewd business practices by exploiting customers with false weights and measures. They made greed a virtue and money a god. They had relied on the political and military powers of human beings for their security, rather than on the LORD God. In short, their trust was misplaced by deifying a host of false gods and goddesses. The tragic consequence was that in 587 B.C. the Babylonians would cart the people of Judah and Jerusalem off into exile.

Today, there are no shortages of false gods either. The sin of idolatry is ever present today too. People choose to trust in human beings, rather than in the One True God. Today people believe that they can find their ultimate meaning and security in

¹ Paul Tournier, *A Doctor’s Casebook in the Light of the Bible*, translated by Edwin Hudson (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1954, Eighth impression 1973), p. 111.

materialism and consumerism. They deify sports athletes and pay them outrageous salaries. Today greed continues to be valued as a virtue and wealth gained by exploiting the poor continues to escalate—as does the exploitation of God’s creation, resulting in all kinds of pollution and diseases, as well as the ongoing extinction of far too many species. In short, people today are no different than the people of Judah, misplacing their trust in human beings, and turning away from their ultimate trust and security in God.

Jeremiah likens Judah’s misplaced trust in human beings to that of a shrub in the desert, a place that is hot and dry, an uninhabited salt land. In other words, a barren place, a place where nothing or next to nothing grows, a place symbolizing destruction and death.

In contrast to such misplaced trust, Jeremiah says that those who trust in the LORD are blessed. Then he goes on to liken those who trust in the LORD to a tree planted by water, sending out roots by the stream. Even when it gets hot its leaves stay green; and if there is a year of drought, the tree still bears fruit.

The cottonwood tree is a familiar sight in New Mexico, and there is one, in particular, which stands near the Rio Grande River south of Albuquerque. It is one of the largest and oldest of the cottonwoods, and many stories are told of the people and events connected to the tree. It has sheltered Indian pow-wows, supported children who played in its branches, cooled many travellers from the desert sun, and witnessed a few bloody skirmishes. Sun, wind, and occasional rain have aged the massive tree, campfires have been made from its twisted limbs, and knives and hatchets have pierced its bark, yet the old tree still stands, a silent and symbolic witness to all of life’s pains and pleasures, and an example of the diverse and marvellous creativity of God.²

Growing up on the prairies makes one aware of the importance of moisture. Folks would try to grow tree or shrub shelter belts around their yards. In years when rain

² *Emphasis: A Preaching Journal for the Parish Pastor* Vol. 24, No. 5, January-February 1995 (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co.), p. 47.

was plentiful, the trees were green and lush. In dry years, the leaves were smaller and seemed always to have a yellow tinge to them, as if they were just days from dying. But those trees that grew next to the sloughs, they always grew. No matter how little rain there was, these trees had the benefit of the winter runoff. As the snow melted, the water ran to the sloughs, and these trees drank up the water and grew. When one drove down the country road, especially in dry years, you could always spot the low spots where the water had collected, by the lushness of the trees.

The person who trusts in the Lord is like a tree growing by a prairie slough—water in abundance.³ Just as the tree has roots that keep it strong and healthy because it is close to the water; just as such a tree can weather the storms; so too our trust, our faith has to be rooted in the LORD to be strong and healthy; to weather the storms, the struggles, the sufferings and challenges that we face in life. That is why it is so important for us to spend time in prayer and reading the Bible on a daily basis; as well as attending worship regularly in order to keep rooted in the LORD. In these ways our trust, our faith in God will be strong and healthy.

Trusting in God, according to Jeremiah is a matter of the heart. The Lord dwells with those who are of a humble and contrite heart. He dwells there.

We call the place where we dwell our home. The Lord tells us then that he feels at home in our contrite and humble hearts.

If you take a glass tumbler and dash it to the floor with all your might, you will see what a broken tumbler is like. It lies there in a thousand pieces. And no glass-maker can put it together again.

Just so with the heart which God has crushed into contrition. Your faith and love, regret and sorrow, praying and reading, sacrifice and self-denial—everything has been dashed to pieces. You sit looking at the remains. And to you the whole thing looks hopeless.

³ *Emphasis* online: <<https://www.sermonsuite.com/emphasis-preaching-journal/growing-prairies>>.

You forget that it is God who has crushed your heart—in order that he might dwell there.

We can honour God in no better way than by believing his grace. That is precisely the reason why he crushes our hearts. Over and over again!⁴

According to the Bible's perspective, the heart is the seat for all human emotions, thoughts, wisdom, and will. Jeremiah knew this in a profound way, that's why he states that those whose hearts turn away from God are guilty of the sin of idolatry, of violating the first commandment, of turning their hearts toward false gods and goddesses. That's also why Jeremiah speaks of the heart as devious above all else; and perverse. The heart is very difficult to understand. That's why, according to Jeremiah only the LORD God can truly understand the heart, and judge human beings.

So our offertory prayer that we periodically sing is a very appropriate one: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit. (See #185 - #188 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* for four different tunes of this prayer.)

May the grace of God grant you and I clean hearts, humble and contrite hearts to trust in God above everyone and everything. In so doing, may we respond with grateful hearts, compassionate hearts, hearts that lead us to serve those who are in greatest need—the poor, the refugee, the forgotten and most vulnerable. Then, as Jeremiah says, we will be rewarded according to the fruit of our doings—the greatest reward, of course, is the privilege of being in loving, gracious relationships with our neighbour and with our LORD.

4 O. Hallesby, *God's Word For Today: A Daily Devotional for the Whole Year* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937 & 1979 Pocket Paperback Edition), p. 131.