

Proverbs 3:5-6

"Trust and Obey"

Saying you trust in someone or something and actually trusting are two different things altogether. Or perhaps another way to say that is sometimes, one might trust in your head or even in your heart, but when it comes to putting that trust into action it might not be so easy.

This brings to mind the story of Blondin, the famous tightrope walker of the 19th Century, who stretched a rope across the thunderous currents of Niagra Falls and walked from Canada to the United States. In 1860 a Royal party from Britain visiting the Falls saw Blondin cross the tightrope on stilts, and again blindfolded. After that he stopped halfway and cooked and ate an omelette. Next he wheeled a wheelbarrow from one side to the other, and returned with a sack of potatoes in it.

Then Blondin turned to the Royal party and asked the Duke of Newcastle, "Do you believe I could take a man across the tightrope in this wheelbarrow?" "Yes, I do", said the Duke. "Well, hop in" replied Blondin. Of course, the Duke declined Blondin's challenge. He might have believed Blondin could do it, but he wasn't about to trust him with his life.

This even holds true when we talk about our trust in God. And perhaps that is why these two verses from Proverbs are so well loved and often quoted. So we can remind ourselves where to place our trust. In fact, I have a suspicion that they may have been very formative verses in the founding of this church. And here is where my suspicions come from.

Did you know that there are several copies of the blueprint of this building hanging throughout this church? At the top it says, "Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Established in 1765", with the drawing underneath. To the left of the drawing there is a quote. "Trust in the Lord with

all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

You see, a few years before 1765, two Scots-Irish Presbyterians began walking toward each other from opposite ends of a settlement in what is now Spartanburg County. They had agreed that where they met, a church would be established and today, that church is Nazareth. Surely they were trusting in God's heart, knowing that the Holy Spirit had already established just the right spot and just the right people so that God's church would still be active here 250 years later!

Since I don't know the exact history, I have often wondered why these particular verses are printed on the drawing, of all the verses there are to choose from. Maybe they were chosen because surely there was an element of trust in the Lord that went into expanding the building to match that blueprint. Just as we trusted in the Lord to send us the right person to be our Office Administrator; and we are trusting still as we search for the right person or persons to lead our Christian Education efforts. And of course, we are trusting in the Lord to let us know who the next installed pastor of Nazareth will be. And maybe these verses were chosen to encourage members, leaders and even ministers – past and present – when they needed to have their call from God reinforced.

Many of you have heard me talk about the formidable task of preaching every Sunday, something that I didn't do until I was called to Nazareth. Before I preached every Sunday that I *wanted* to. So I am often heard comparing it to having a baby on Sunday and finding out on Monday that you are pregnant again – EVERY WEEK! My husband, whose faith must be stronger than mine, reminds me often that if God called me to the pulpit, God will not send me there alone. In fact, God will step into the pulpit with me each week.

So for me personally, it is a wonderful reminder each week to see those verses in black and white hanging throughout the church because I am reassured that God has called me to be here "at such a time as this", to quote the Old Testament hero Mordecai. I am also reminded that, while I have a part in the work that will be done in the time that we worship together, the real work will be done by the Holy Spirit, whether I am helpful, prepared, ready or not! Yet, even as I read them each week, I will confess that I bring an element of worry into the sanctuary with me.

Now, I hope I am not the only person here who struggles with this concept. So just in case you, too, have to be reminded of our need to lean on God's wisdom, I will share a few things that have come to me as I studied the passage this week. First, I decided that in order to trust in the Lord, we really have to let go of pride. This does not mean setting aside our intellect, our ambitions or our gifts. It does mean recognizing that these are gifts that **belong** to God, **came** from God and will best be used **for** God if we give them away according to God's leading.

I came across a cartoon of a man hanging on the side of a cliff, grasping on to a small branch sticking out of the side of the mountain which was about to break from his weight. There is a hand extending down to help him, but his other hand is not free. You see, it is weighted down with a bulging bag labeled PRIDE. The quote in the cartoon is, "Sometimes it's hard to open your hand when you need to." So if we are to trust in God's ways, we have to let go of the pride that tells us our way is better.

I also think that we sometimes have to let go of our plan. And I cannot believe I just said that. Because if anyone likes to have a plan, it is me. However, trusting in God's plan means remembering that God can see so much more than we can.

A few years ago during a visit to Chicago, we stayed on the 15th floor of a downtown hotel. I was standing at the window, watching the busy traffic flowing four lanes abreast in the opposite directions. However, one car had engine trouble and was stalled in the middle of all that traffic. From my vantage point I could see for blocks. I watched several drivers switch into the same lane as the stalled car, unaware of what was ahead. Thinking they were gaining time, these motorists were actually crossing over into a lane that would only cause a greater delay.

And that's how we are. As we travel along life's road, we do much the same as those misguided drivers. With our limited foresight we select the route that seems best—only to find that the temporary advance has led us into a course filled with delay and heartache. But how reassuring that we can look to God, who is above everything, who knows the end from the beginning! This is why the writer of Proverbs could say, "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths". When the Lord indicates a "stop" or a "change of lanes" or a "wait," we should gladly obey and learn to let go of our plan.

However, I do think these verses are harder for us today because we live in such complicated times. When I was in middle school, getting into trouble meant chewing gum in school or passing a note to my best friend in English. Today, our young people are faced with cyber bullying and drugs and other challenges that I never faced and that the original readers of Proverbs never dreamed of.

So when we read that we are to trust in the Lord "with all our hearts", it is a reminder that our hearts can be deceptive. It is easy to believe that something is God's will if I want it badly enough. But to truly understand God's heart means that there must be a relationship, a joining of our hearts to God's. Minister John Piper once wrote, "The response of our hearts to God's act of creation and Christ's act of sacrifice is single-minded faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."

We will not have that level of trust if we do not know this truth. And while our hearts can be deceptive, God's heart will never give up on us. God is always beckoning us to accept this truth for our lives.

Trusting in God's ways also means to trust in God *as God is revealed to us in Scripture*. And again, the only way to do this is through our own studies and our own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It has been such a blessing to me, and I hope to all of you, to see the hunger for knowledge in this body of Christ as attendance at our Bible Study increases every week. The more we understand the Word the better we are at knowing God's heart and God's will for our lives. But this is a knowledge that we are not only called to grasp, but to teach and share through our words and our actions. Especially with our young people.

I don't know how many of you remember a time in 1997 when a cult that called themselves "Heaven's Gate" were led by their leader to evacuate this earth. He proposed that they all catch a ride on a spacecraft that he said was following the Halle Bop comet. They were asked to dress in matching shirts, pants and Nike shoes and wrap their heads in plastic after taking a large dose of phenobarbital and chasing it with vodka. Thirty-eight people died in this mass suicide.

The reason this event stands out in my mind is because as I watched the story on the news, I did not know that my 8 year old son was listening too. The reporter said that the leader, Marshall Applewhite, told his followers that God had given him these instructions. I realized that Carter had heard all this when he asked me in pure horror why God had told them to do such a thing.

I told him that the man who said that was very sick. And although he believed that God told him this, God did not. Of course, Carter asked me how I knew. And the wisdom of God's

heart gave me the words to try to explain this dreadful event to Carter. Here is what I said: "If anyone ever tells you that God wants you to do something that does not sound like the God that mommy and daddy are teaching you about or the God that you hear about in Sunday School then they are confused and they are wrong." I went on to remind Carter that God loves us all so much that he would never want him to do something so dangerous, no matter who told him that.

Carter was appeased for the moment and I recall being so glad that we were people of faith who had already exposed our children to the teachings of God. How can any one of us lean on God's understanding if we do not have knowledge of what God holds in His heart?

So what this Proverb boils down to is basically a covenant. An agreement between God and God's children. Our part of the covenant is to trust and obey. God's part of the covenant is to make God's will known and to make our paths straight. Of course the second leads to the first. And friends, it has been my experience that God uses a wealth of things to guide us. Besides the obvious gift of the Word and the beauty of creation, God uses rejection as our protection. God sends us friends and family to listen and to comfort and to speak the truth in love. God uses the hard questions of hurting children to help us form our theology, even when we don't know that is what we are doing. God's ways are not our ways and to that I say, "Thanks be to God!"

So listen again to the writer of Proverbs, this time from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. "Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all. Run to GOD! Run from evil!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf, Nazareth Presbyterian Church, May 21, 2017