

Sept 21 – Trust in Community

John 15:1-11

As we continue to explore the issue of trust in God we move from the individual to the community. Jesus centered much of his teaching about faithfulness in community. The scripture read today is a prime example. Here he talks about how he is the vine and we are the branches. Only as we stay connected to him can we produce much fruit. Later, Paul and other New Testament writers talk about the church as being the body of Christ. So, putting those two together, it is through our connectedness to the Christian community that we are fed, nourished, produce fruit and yes continue to grow in our trust of God.

This second level of trust that comes through the community of faith is our safety net. It doesn't mean that the community will fix everything and make it right but it is the awareness that we are not going through things alone. The church is the visible reminder of the fact that God is with us and will not leave us orphaned. The special that Jaie wrote and sang today, and I hope you were paying attention to the words, shares some of this idea. She talks about how there is not a day that she doesn't see the face of God, hear the voice of God, and feel the grace of God. Where she sees those visible signs of the holy is in the smiles of children, the laughter of children, through the blessings of people. It is a reminder that God is with us and among us. It is seen in community and through it we find the trust that we need.

Learning to accept and rely upon this trust and help is harder than the one on one support we talked about last week. This trust is nebulous. We can't hold its hand, we can't call it on the phone but we can rely upon it and as the music said, see it at work in our lives and in the world every day. Often we see it more after the fact than when we are going through difficult times. We realize that the love and the prayers and the concerns of the community have gotten us through this tough time.

So today I want us to talk about what it means to abide in the community of God and how we learn to trust it. We need to see that not a day goes by where we are not surrounded by God's love. This is the theme of the special music that we heard today. It

is also a core teaching of the church. John Wesley, our founder, said there were four levels of God's grace that we could experience in our faith journey. The first of these is called prevenient grace. It is the idea that we are always surrounded by the Grace of God whether or not we know it or accept it. Have you ever wondered why I say at the beginning of each time we have communion these words, "In the United Methodist Church all are welcome at the Lord's Table." It goes back to this idea of prevenient grace. Wesley believed God was at work in everyone's life, even if they never went to church or had accepted God. The church had to provide all possible opening for people to accept this grace. He once said, "Perhaps someday a man will in the depths of despair come to the Lord's Table and there find grace. Who are we to keep him from such a chance?" God is with us and surrounds us and it is the church, Christ's body, imperfect as it is, through which we experience God's presence and grace.

I have seen it at work this month and experienced its power. We, the church, have been there for Marsha and Lee who are making great life changes to care for a grandson. It has come in practical ways such as loading the moving van to preparing goodies for the workers. Jenny and I have experienced the power of the community to pray as we have marched through the daily struggles with our dear little Gwen. Prayers for her have literally circled the globe. Your hugs and words of concern have reminded us God is with us no matter what and allows us to trust God more fully because we trust you. The quilt you made and the names on the letter that went with it were visible reminders that we are abiding in God's love.

Last week we talked about how we have to learn how to trust individuals and that happens, in part, by also being trustworthy ourselves. We also need to learn to trust our community of faith. We hear this scripture and find that we are to abide in God. This is part of what it means to be faithful. It has been my experience as pastor that too often we are a bit more independent than what is good for us. We are willing to roll up our sleeves and help others. I am always amazed at the generosity of the church. Whether it be gifts of time, food or money, when there is a need you respond. The easiest calls I make are those asking for help for another. The response is almost always yes. And if not a yes there is a good reason and the person says but what else can I do. Even more

you are often calling me offering to help. So we are ready, willing and able but when the role is reversed and we become the ones who need the help, who need to trust the community to get us through.... That can be quite a different thing. We need to trust and to let the care of the community come to us at times, because it is part of abiding in God and learning to trust God. There are also some wonderful things that come to us when we begin to abide and trust in the nourishing help and love of the church.

Jesus says: It is a way to remain in God's love. I like that image. As we are connected to the church relying upon it we are also connecting to God's love. When you think about trust words like reliability and confidentiality come to mind. But I think love is also there. If you feel that the person is helping out of duty or because it is their job it is hard to trust. That personal connection is required. Jesus says that in abiding in Christ, being fully supportive of and supported by the community we find love.

Here is the other thing we are offered. Jesus says it is a way to find joy. We don't think about joy as being a byproduct of trust. Yet, when I think about it, this is certainly the case. I recall the times when someone has needed that bit of help and I have marshalled the faith community. What do I see, smiles of joy and gratitude? When people are going through difficult times and feel the prayer support of the faithful, there is a sense of joy. Trusting the community brings joy. This all comes back to the idea that we learn that we are not alone. Deep trust that helps us get through tough times comes from knowing people are there standing with us, supporting us and helping us.

But we have a task as well. We are to produce fruit for others. Part of that fruit is creating a trusting community. And we know the things that build trust. We need to make the church a place where all feel valued; a place where all can use their gifts; a place where there is respect given and forgiveness shared; a place that is willing to help and a place that does all of this out of a deep sense of faith in God and as a response to that love we feel from God. When we do this we produce great fruit and one of those fruits is named grace.

In closing let me share a brief account of my seeing this lived out. He was a self-made man. He didn't need other's help. He was pretty distrustful and skeptical because

he had been let down many times in his life by people and by institutions. He came to church with his wife because she felt it was important for the family to worship together and it a good example for the girls. He was a policeman and he worked as many Sunday's as he could so he would have an excuse not to attend church. Then his wife was stricken with cancer. Over the next two years, the time between her diagnosis and death, he had to learn trust. He tried to do it all at first. He found he could not work full time, take care of the girls, run the house and be there for his wife. Grudgingly he accepted some help from a couple of his wife's friends. There were tense moments in the beginning as he kept trying to pay them for their help and he being told they were doing it as a friend and as the church. Over time he came to trust the church and that we were with him and would be with him. When I finally said to him one day not long before his wife died, to his question about how was he going to raise the girls, the church will be with you in that journey until they are raised or you don't want us anymore. He paused, took a deep breath and then said, "I know and that is what keeps me going." He didn't use the words but he trusted us and the church was faithful. What was the result? He became very close to members in the church and the church. He quit taking Sunday shifts and soon was volunteering for work projects. He grew in love and tolerance for others. His cynicism decreased and his compassion for others increased.

Trust, it begins at that one on one level but moves towards trusting the community as a whole as we realize God is all around us and supporting us. As the scripture shows we are more fruitful and strong through abiding in God and in the community of faith. Next week we will see the results of building on trust in one another and trust in the community. It allows us to trust in God even when life is most challenging.