

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Practicing our Trust Falls

Luke 13.31-35

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If you've ever been to any youth retreat or any team building function, then surely you have participated in a trust fall. Russ and Bennett demonstrated how it works during the Children's Time. I will tell you that Bennett didn't have a heads-up on that. A Trust Fall is when one person literally trusts another person with his or her life – or at least trusts that a body doesn't hit the floor! In all the times I've participated in this exercise, I have never seen anyone hit the ground. It works every time. It is not a stretch to believe that Bennett trusts his father to catch him. What is a stretch is to believe that trust comes that easily – especially in the Church. Oh if it were only that simple – fall back and be caught – no crash landings. Unfortunately, too many times for too many people, trust has been broken. You shared a confidence that you asked to be kept confidential only to find out that secrets are rarely actually kept. You allowed yourself to become vulnerable only to be put to shame. You were abused by the very person you thought should never hurt you. You shared a piece of your life with someone and the relationship was not reciprocated. You showed generosity only to be trampled upon and taken advantage of. Trust is hard to come by these days. We certainly don't trust politicians – they say whatever it takes to get elected. We have found that government can be downright corrupt. And when police officers and teachers and preachers prey on the innocent, then we come to believe that indeed no one can be trusted. People talk behind our backs in ways they would never speak to our face. Lies and deceit make the headlines, and we have come to judge people as guilty until proven innocent more often than the reverse on which our legal system is based. Why is that? Because trust has

been broken too many times. Actually it only takes one incidence of broken trust to do irreparable harm.

As we make our way along this Lenten journey and consider how our faith is forged, today we turn our attention to the word – Trust. How will we - how can we . . . trust? I will tell you that I think it takes practice – just like any other important venture we undertake. If we choose a life of faith, we will have to practice Trust in order for our faith to be strengthened. What comes fairly naturally to us as children can be obliterated with one act of broken Trust. And as soon as that happens we have to decide if we will allow ourselves to ever trust again. I'm afraid more often than not we decide to keep things close to the vest instead of risking vulnerability. I'm afraid more often than not we decide to go it alone rather than asking for help. I'm afraid more often than not we choose to live our lives filled with skepticism and suspicion assuming that everyone is more against us than for us. If you think I'm being over-reactive – just listen to one another talk . . . about our families, about our government, about our politics, about our schools. If you really listen, I believe you will hear a lack of Trust that is pervasive in our culture.

In Luke's gospel we have been presented with two animals for our consideration: a fox and a hen. The first is cunning and sly and a predator – that's the Herod character in this play. The second is protective and nurturing and a mother – the Jesus character. Already responsible for the demise of John the Baptist, Herod is the scoundrel extraordinaire. "Some friendly Pharisees counsel Jesus to get out of Dodge before the menacing Herod devours him. That villain has already imprisoned and executed Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, and even the not-so astute can foresee that Jesus will share a similar fate should he linger within Herod's jurisdiction. Discretion is the better part of valor, says conventional wisdom. Dodge the threat, and live to

preach another day.” (“Enduring Desire,” by Doug Lee, The Ekklesia Project, Feb 24, 2010)

Simply put: Herod cannot be trusted, and Jesus labels him a fox. But Jesus does not let fear rule.

How interesting for the opposing animal to be a hen – perfect prey for the fox, one would think. The hen would be the animal that should attempt to fly in the face of danger – a flurry of feathers scattering in the air. “But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which -- if you think about it --is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks. Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first. Which he does, as it turns out.” (The Christian Century, “As a Hen Gathers Her Brood,” Barbara Brown Taylor, February 25, 1986, page 201)

Jesus faces his present and what lies ahead with great Resolve (our word from last week) and with Trust (our word for today). How does he do it? He does it because he understands the wings of the hen. The hen’s wings are not so heavy as to be weighed down. Sometimes we can protect so strongly that we provide what is more like an armored shield approaching each episode of life like everything is a battle. This way breeds fear and suspicion and all approaching people as potential enemies. This kind of environment does not breed Trust. Yet listen to the news and listen to how we label people that are different from us and you will hear warrior

language. I don't trust warriors whose motto is: Your demise is my Victory. The hen's wings do not suffocate, and they do not smother. There is room to roam even under the watchful cover of the shelter of the feathers. Sometimes in our efforts to protect we hover so closely that we actually repel that which we seek to draw close to us. This kind of environment does not breed Trust. Listen to the words of the enabler. In almost every dysfunctional relationship you will find an enabler that hovers and smothers and ends up alienating the one they are trying to help. The hen's wings are not magical. It's not as if after being gathered under the wings of the mother hen that harm cannot come. If we preach magical thinking, we most certainly will not foster an environment of Trust. The reality is that the fox always lingers – Herods are always out and about – and there are no promises that we will not get hurt. As a matter of fact, we are not promised an easy or safe life, but rather we are assured that hardship and adversity will be our companions and our response is to take up our own crosses and follow.

Jesus understood the wings of the hen to be shelter and care. Those wings serve as a guiding force to usher us along The Way. Those wings serve as a reminder that we are not alone. But we are a self-reliant, pull-ourselves-up-by-our-boot-straps kind of people. And those kinds of people don't need to Trust. They just need their own independent spirit. And often they are lonely beyond belief.

With tensions rising all around Jesus because of what he said and did and who people were claiming him to be, the Pharisees offered a word of warning to Jesus – *you'd better get out of here for you are in danger*. Jesus gives them a message for his adversary – *you tell that fox that I'm too busy to be afraid of him*. And then Jesus laments for Jerusalem. He *desired to gather [her] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and [they] were not willing*. I can't help but wonder – are we still not willing to Trust this mother hen who desires to gather

her brood under her wings? Jesus was trying to show The Way – a way that casts out fear and teaches about Goodness and Mercy and Love. He was trying to show The Way of Hope and Peace and Joy, but they couldn't hear it. They couldn't believe it. And they certainly wouldn't Trust it. It's what got him killed. Because The Way of Goodness and Mercy and Love and Hope and Peace and Joy is not congruent with what we see and experience in this life – we fail to Trust. “The greatest danger, Jesus knows, is not one that Herod or any other worldly authority would bring, but the danger of being diverted from his mission. That mission is the proclamation that God's kingdom is at hand, available to all, including those his society has written off: widows, debtors, sinners, tax collectors and little children. His devotion to his mission is in fact a fierce maternal love for those who most need to hear this message . . . It's a truism now that ours is an age of fear and anxiety. Whether it be terrorism or further economic decline, we are a people who are assaulted daily with the message that everything might fall apart. And in some cases, the messengers are right . . . We have become so accustomed to the daily litany of what might destroy us that we might not even notice the way the headlines seep into our consciousness as we lock our doors, hold our purses closer on the street, and never let our children out of our sight. We can collect these stories of loss as warning signs, constantly telling us which paths not to go down, until finally we are stuck in our `safe' zones, limiting our activities, our relationships, our sharing of resources with others. We could spend so much time guarding our health, our possessions, our safety that we miss the point of traveling this life at all. But if Jesus' life is our model, we dare not imagine that the safe path is always the faithful one.” (The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself, Reflections By Dan Clendenin, Essay posted 22 February 2010, “Don't Fear the Thief,” A guest essay by Pam Fickenscher. Pam is a pastor of Edina Community Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota.)

If Jesus' life is our model, then we will learn to Trust in the Goodness of the hen's wings, and we will choose not to live our lives in fear of all of the foxes. There's another way to do a Trust Fall. You stand in a circle of people that are shoulder to shoulder and cross your arms over your chest and close your eyes. And you begin to fall. And they gently pass you around the circle and back and forth and side to side. And because you are surrounded by people that you Trust, you don't hit the floor – for if one person fails to catch you, there is another person there to break your fall. I pray that our church will be that kind of circle where we can practice our Trust Falls. May it be so.