

Sunday, April 20, 2008, Easter 5A
Cross+Road Lutheran Church, O.P. FL

TRUSTING JESUS MORE THAN WE TRUST OURSELVES

For several years a woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night because she feared burglars. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he did find a burglar. "Good evening," said the man of the house. "I am pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my wife. She has been waiting 10 years to meet you."

What one of us doesn't have fear or anxiety about something? Fear of making the wrong decision; fear of one of those phone calls in the middle of the night regarding a loved one; fear of speaking in public; fear of being single all my life or fear of getting married again; fear of death. We've got a lot to be anxious about.

In today's reading from John, the disciples have a lot to be anxious about. It was Holy Week, the night of the Last Supper. Jesus has just finished washing their feet, predicting his betrayal, and predicting Peter's denial. Things seem to be spinning out of control for those gathered. And Jesus is being more odd than usual. The unknown seemed to be looming larger and larger for them. And Jesus says to them—and to us—"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me... I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus has asked the disciples to trust him. Stop worrying. **Trust Jesus.**

I was at a memorial service last Saturday for a member at Advent; incidentally, he was also Chuck Hoover's son-in-law. During the eulogies offered by friends of Craig's, one of them said something that grabbed hold of me. Remembering her friend, she said, "Craig was growing so much spiritually. I think he was finally at that point where he was beginning to trust God more than he trusted himself." And she went on to say nice things about him. But that phrase stuck with me—trusting God more than he trusted himself.

Honestly, what I heard in that statement convicted me. Because for us relatively able types, it can be very hard to **trust anyone more than** I trust me. You see, I know me. And in spite of my faults that I know too well, I am also aware that I am capable of much. School and academics have never been too hard for me—from straight A's in elementary to dean's list in college and seminary, I've always known I could do the work. I've never had trouble with the ladies; I had attractive

prom dates in high school—I didn't have take my sister; I could always find a date in college; and of course, I ended up marrying way out of my league. Career stuff has gone easily for me: I didn't have that period of time many college students go through wondering what to do with their lives, my first call was to a great staff situation, and compared with other mission starts, Cross+Road is an amazing poster child for how church starts ought to go. I've found tremendous friends along the way, I'm a proud parent of wonderful daughters, I live in a nice home in a wonderful community. In other words, I know I am not going to let myself down; or at least if I do let myself down, I know that I can recover and keep moving forward. I trust me a lot. But trusting someone else that much, we'll its never come easy.

When I pledged **my fraternity in college**, there came a portion of our initiation night that stalled me. We spent the night blindfold, walking around this rural Ohio farmland going through all sorts of stupid little exercises and team building activities. Toward the end of the night, each one of us was positioned near a flowing creek. Blindfolded, it sounded like a raging river. Our pledge master informed us that we needed to fall backward “into the river”—the old trust fall. And if I believed that our big brother would always be there for me, than I shouldn't have any problem falling backward, knowing that my big brother Pete would be there to keep me from falling into the river. Meanwhile, all the other active members of the fraternity were playing little head games with us. “Hey, Pete's got to get down here to catch Jim,” they would whisper just loud enough for me to hear. “Has any one seen Pete?” they'd quietly shout. Meanwhile, the pledge master kept telling me to fall, trusting that Pete wouldn't let anything happen to me. Before I would try it, I asked outloud, “Pete, are you there?” No answer. I asked my pledge master if he was really there and this was some game? He just kept tell me that if I trusted him, fall—never answering my question. I'm not sure how long this went on—minutes at least. But then I thought, “What's the worst that can happen? I'll just be cold and wet the rest of the night. And finally, finally, back I leaned, only to find that there was my big brother—as he had been the whole time—silently waiting to catch me.

The next year, when I got to be one of those voices of doubt around the new pledges, and could see that we were stood too far away from the little creek to get wet even if we were dropped, I was struck by how quickly all of those pledges leaned back, most without even questioning. They simply trusted, in spite of the voices, that their big brother would be there.

I recalled this college memory sitting there last week at the memorial service as I imagine Craig for the final time leaning back into the arms of Jesus, one he trusted who would always be there. And I couldn't help but wonder if I was finally at the point where I was beginning to trust Jesus more than I trusted myself... And I couldn't help but wonder if that was true for anyone else out here in the congregation of successful business men and women, this congregation of proud parents, this congregation of brilliant students and athletes. Are you at the point yet where you trust Jesus more than you trust yourselves?...

A man was making a trip on the **rapids of the Colorado River**, where the water rushes quickly over the rocks near the surface. His canoe overturned, but he managed to catch hold of it. He hung on, terrified, with a vise-like grip. Some people saw his desperate situation. One of them crawled out on some rocks, at a bend in the river down stream. As the man came hurtling by, his rescuer caught him by the coat and shouted, "Let go!" The imperiled man was so scared, however, he kept on clutching to the canoe as it swept him downstream to destruction.

As a culture, we trust things, we cling to things, that ultimately will sweep us downstream to our destruction. "Let go," calls the voice of Jesus. Crawling out on the limb of the cross, Jesus catches us as we go hurtling by. "Let go," he shouts. And yet, so many of us fail to believe that his grasp will be what saves us—not our successes, not our bank balances, not even our marriages—none of the things we cling to will bring us life. "I am the way, the truth, and life," says Jesus. Cling only to me. Trust only me.

After a few of the usual Sunday evening hymns, the church's pastor slowly stood up, walked over to the pulpit and, before he gave his sermon for the evening, briefly introduced a guest minister who was in the service that evening. In the introduction, the pastor told the congregation that the guest minister was one of his dearest childhood friends and that he wanted him to have a few moments to greet the church and share whatever he felt would be appropriate for the service. With that, an elderly man stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak.

"A father, his son and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific coast," he began, "when a fast approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to the shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright and the three were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized." The old man hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time since the service began, looking somewhat interested in his story.

The aged minister continued. “Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: To which boy would he throw the other end of the life line? He only had seconds to make the decision. The father knew that his son was a Christian, and he also knew that his son’s friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves. As the father yelled out, ‘I love you, son!’ he threw out the life line to his son’s friend. By the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells into the black of night. His body was never recovered.” By this time, the two teenagers were sitting up straight in the pew, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of the old minister’s mouth. “The father,” he continued, “knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus, and he could not bear the thought of his son’s friend stepping into an eternity without Jesus. Therefore he sacrificed his son to save the son’s friend.

“How great is the love of God that he should do the same for us! Our heavenly father sacrificed his only begotten Son that we could be saved. I urge you to accept his offer to rescue you and take a hold of the life line he is throwing out to you in this service.” With that, the old man turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room. The pastor again walked slowly to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon, with an invitation at the end. However, no one responded to the appeal. Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old man’s side. “That was a nice story,” politely stated one of them, “but I don’t think it was very realistic for a father to give up his only son’s life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian.”

“Well, you’ve got a point there,” the old man replied, glancing down at his worn Bible. A big smile broadened his narrow face. He once again looked up at the boys and said, “It sure isn’t very realistic, is it? But I’m standing here today to tell you that story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up his Son for me. You see, I was that father, and your pastor is my son’s friend.”

It isn’t very realistic that **I could trust Jesus that much**. I’m not sure that I could have decided the same way that father did. Such radical trust in Jesus that he could commit his son to him that way. And I see myself standing there again on side of the creek, asking questions for more clarification. But we see how this radical trust, like that of the father, built up another leader in the church. Did you catch the contagious nature of a trusting life? That father’s witness to his trust in God caused another to begin trusting Jesus more than he trusted himself. Can you and I begin to witness like that? Can our lives be a testimony about trust in God?

That day with the disciples, Jesus tells them that he's going to prepare a place for them, a dwelling place with God. Typically, we hear this text at funerals and often think of it as Jesus' promise to make heaven ready for us whenever it is our time comes. But I kept thinking about what Jesus said in the context of the other reading we heard today from 1 Peter: "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." What if Jesus had something more immediate in mind when he talked about a dwelling place. This reading from 1 Peter is about the church, and what if what Jesus meant was that he is going to prepare church for us?... What if trusting in Jesus is intrinsically tied to trusting his church which he prepares for us? What if trusting churches are created by people, who like Jesus, trust their whole lives, and their deaths, to God? Like that father? What if God comes to dwell among us his church through our trust in him and how that trust reaches out to grab others—grab others who are sinking to their destructions or hurtling downstream toward them. Through his Church, Jesus reaches out again and again, shouting "Let go!" expecting us to be there for them? A house with many rooms for those who need saving. Something to consider, I think.

On the old Merv Griffin Show, there was a time when he was interviewing some body builders. As he was standing there looking at these guys with all these muscles, he asked a powerful question: "What do you use these muscles for?" One guy answered by flexing his muscles in one of those body builder stances. But Merv said, "No, you don't understand. What do you USE all those muscles for?" The guy said, "I'll show you." And he flexed again in another stance. Again Merv said, "No. You still don't understand my question. Read my lips. What do you USE them FOR?" The guy posed again.

Lots of times, I think we church people pose. We sing songs about trusting God with our lives. We drop a few dollars in the plate, demonstrating our trust. We come to worship when the Jaguars aren't playing at home. We do things to look like we've got some spiritual muscle. But then comes the time when we have to trust, in spite of all doubts voices—in spite of how good we might look and how successful we've been. I wonder how many of us pose with our trust muscles instead of actually using our trust muscles... Are we actually a strong house built of living stones where God dwells, or does it just look that way? Could we trust one of our own to Jesus and **reach out to one not yet** ours?

I think Craig was just beginning to trust Jesus more than he trusted himself. May that be said of each of us. Amen.