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“Here We Receive New Life” 1. In Our Attitudes About How We Trust

Acts 5:27-31; 34-35; 38-41 NRSV When they had brought [Peter and the Apostles in], they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But [they said], "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree....When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men....I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them - in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

I recently saw a post on someone's Facebook page that made me both smile and wince at the same time. It said: "There are two reasons why we don't trust people. First, we don't know them. Second, we do." Trust does seem to be an endangered species these days, doesn't it? In 1958, the public trust rating of the United States government, was 73 percent. Now that number is 24 percent.¹ Trust in the U.S. Congress is at an all time low of 14 percent² – there are few occupations that poll any lower on the trust scale. It is estimated that in the last 65 years, the Roman Catholic

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/04/upshot/the-long-decline-of-trust-in-government-and-why-that-can-be-patriotic.html>

²<http://www.gallup.com/poll/180113/2014-approval-congress-remains-near-time-low.aspx>

Church has paid almost four billion dollars to victims of clergy sexual abuse.³

Numerous reports say that American trust in big business has also slumped to record lows. These falling levels of trust are signs of the lessening of what sociologist Robert Putnam calls our “social capital” – by which he means the goodwill and willingness to give the benefit of the doubt and assume the best about others. For Putnam those levels of social capital are falling as people seem to become more and more suspicious of one another, more inclined to huddle up in groups of like-minded folks, more inclined to move more and more into gated communities whether physical or mental. Social capital and trust levels also weaken as folks get their news from only one biased source – some reports in fact suggest that if you only get your news from **either** Fox News **or** MSNBC you will not only be less inclined to trust but you will actually know less about the news than if you watched no news at all!

What does all of this have to do with the Book of Acts and the story it tells of the birth and spread of the early church, and what does that story – and particularly our scripture for this morning – have to do with our attitudes about how and who and why we trust? Well, in both the time that Luke was writing about and in his own time – for remember, Luke wrote his gospel and the book of Acts fifty years or so after Jesus – things were in some ways similar to our situation. Mistrust was rampant: in the early church, the Jerusalem folks led by Peter didn’t trust Paul, and no one trusted the Romans, and the city folks distrusted the country folks, and the various sects of

³<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/11/04/the-catholic-church-has-paid-out-3994797060-10-as-a-result-of-the-sex-abuse-scandals/> and <http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/ncr-research-costs-sex-abuse-crisis-us-church-underestimated>

Judaism (including those Jews who now believed in Jesus as the Messiah) didn't trust one another, and none of them trusted the Samaritans! And in Luke's own day, around the year 80 or 85 C.E., the situation is even more dire: the relationship with their Roman occupiers is rapidly coming to a head and those who wanted to try to accommodate Rome didn't trust those who wanted to strike at Rome, and the Jews and the Christians -- now sadly more and more separated from one another unlike in the beginning days of the Church -- were more and more distrustful of each another in too many places, each of them wanting to say that they were the true heirs of the history and tradition.

Doesn't that lack of trust, that mutual suspiciousness, that increasing inability to see those of different races and religions and ethnicities and orientations sound familiar? Sadly, I think we must admit that it does. And so we want to know: who can we trust to speak authoritatively and truthfully? When someone says that he or she is speaking for God, or has the truth about God, or knows the mind of God, how do we assess the truthfulness and trustworthiness of those claims? We find ourselves in the same position, then, as that Council which Luke describes in our scripture when Peter said to them "We must obey God rather than any human authority." That Council wanted to know how they could trust that what Peter and the Apostles were saying was truly of God or not. And so do we.

Is the "truth" preached by Warren Jeffs and the Fundamentalist Mormons, whose leaders "marry" twelve-year-old girls to sixty-year-old men who then rape them and force them into a life of poverty and fear of God or not? When ISIS leaders speak of God's "joy" at the destruction of beautiful ancient artifacts and the beheading of innocents and the subjugation and mutilation of women is that of God or not? When

certain preachers say that gay and lesbian and transgendered persons should be killed, or when the leader of a congregation refuses to allow a mother bury her police officer daughter killed in the line of duty because she was lesbian, is that of God or not? How do we know, how do we decide, how do we act, how do we know how to trust?

I have no final answers to those questions, but I do want to propose three tests this morning that you and I can use when thinking about things that people say are “from God.” These are not original with me, but come from a theology professor whom Barbara and I both had in seminary and whom we both credit with opening us up to new ways of thinking about God. So, when we ask if we can trust what someone is saying as being truly of God, the first test is this: **Is the statement intellectually credible?**

Now that sounds very abstract, but it’s not really. To take a perhaps obvious and easy example, if someone says that God made the world four thousand years ago, you and I have to set aside four hundred years of settled science about the nature of geology to believe this is true. Is that credible? I don’t think so. Now, those who still want to maintain this point of view say that God put what *appear* to be fossils and radiocarbon dating evidence into the earth to see whether we would still trust God enough to say that these fossils and that evidence are in fact tricks played on us by God to see who “really” has faith and who doesn’t. But does that really make sense? Are you really required, as one person once put it, to check your brain at the church door? I don’t think so. In other words, I don’t believe that you and I should trust statements as being “from God” if they require us to deny the very best of settled science. Sure, there are lots of areas of science that are not settled, but this example is not one of them.

Moreover, those who would maintain that fossil and carbon-dating evidence are

artifacts put there by God as tricks to see who will be “faithful” leads me to the second test: **Is a statement about God or supposedly from God, morally plausible?** If you had a friend who was constantly lying to you and tricking you to see if you would still be his friend would you find that moral? Or so much more seriously, if human parents abused their child to “test” whether the child would still love them, would we find that admirable and moral? I don’t think so. I believe we’d think it exceedingly immoral. Why, then, would we want to say similar things about God? We would not call a human parent good who did such monstrous things; why would we label God “good” if God did them? It’s just not morally plausible.

In some ways, though, it is the third test of whether to trust a statement as “from God” that is the most crucial: **is what is being said consistent with the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?** And what is that good news? Well, we celebrated it last Sunday and for a whole slew of Sundays; for after all, Easter is not just a day but a season.⁴ The Good News of Easter - the very centerpiece of our faith - is that not only can nothing – not even death – defeat the love of God, but that God’s love is for everyone. Period. Easter is not about judgment; it’s not about some terrible theology of an angry God demanding that there be a “blood sacrifice” of God’s Son in order to appease God’s anger. (Once again, ask yourselves, if such were said about a human father would we call that good, would we find that a worthy thing?) No, the Easter message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God wishes that no one – no one! – would be lost. A generation after Luke was writing, the writer of Second Peter put it (2

⁴Formulation gratefully borrowed from the Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell

Peter 3:9) this way: God “doesn’t want anyone lost. He’s giving everyone space and time to change.” Or as the NRSV translates it: God “is patient with you, not wanting any to perish....” Or think of the image of Jesus when he compared himself to a mother hen wanting to protect Jerusalem – ALL of Jerusalem, Jews, Romans and all. Or think of the image of God as portrayed in the parable of the Prodigal Son whose father has astonishing patience and astounding joy when one who was so despicably lost is found.

The point is this: Please do not trust any statement as being “from God” or as truly describing God that demeans or dehumanizes or discriminates against any group. And therefore let us also be very, very wary of what we say about people. Let us be very wary about the jokes we tell at the expense of others. Let us be very wary of letting our justified outrage at the actions of a few folks color our understanding of a whole group of people. Let us be very wary of ever implying that the evil of some people is stronger and more powerful than the love of God.

Long ago, the Psalmist pithily put it this way: “The Lord is good to all, and compassionate toward all his works” (Psalm 145:9). All. All. The great Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas summed up the Gospel in this way: “God wills good to each thing. Therefore, God hates nothing.”⁵ Nothing. Nothing. As followers of the Risen Lord, the One who shows us these things, who assures us of our hope, can we try to do any less?

⁵<http://the-supplement.blogspot.com/2008/09/philosophy-of-st-thomas-god-hates.html>