

# Trusting Those Who Lead Us

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**Opening Words** – adapted from *Guerrillas of Grace* by Ted Loder

Let us be grateful this morning  
that out of the turbulence of our lives  
a kingdom is coming,  
    is being shaped even now  
    out of our slivers of loving,  
    our bits of trusting,  
    our sprigs of hoping,  
    our tootles of laughing,  
    ur drips of crying,  
    that our of our songs and struggles,  
    our griefs and triumphs,  
    we are gathered up and saved.

## Sermon

Several years ago I met a woman at a dinner party who is a professor of political science. When I told her that I'd grown up in rural Minnesota, she gave me a wry grin and said she'd done the research for her dissertation in a small Minnesota town. Fascinating people, those Minnesotans, she said. Awfully gullible. How do you mean? I asked. Well, she said, they seem to be so trusting that people will never take advantage of them; then when they do, they are completely crushed, as if they just can't understand how that could happen. And then they go back to trusting until it happens again. "Trust" is their default position.

The Cohen brothers had a little fun with this default position of trust a few years ago. In their movie, *Fargo*, there is a scene in which the wife of one of the villains is about to be

kidnapped from her St. Paul home. She sits on her sofa watching the masked man as he works at breaking into the house. She can't quite believe what's happening, that someone would do her harm. The scene strikes us as funny because we know that assuming good intentions can be taken too far. Human nature does have its shadow side.

I've heard it said recently that we as a nation have a crisis of trust. We no longer simply have vigorous debate about the direction in which this nation is heading. We question the integrity and the patriotism of our national leaders. If leaders disagree with us, we cannot trust that they have our best interest at heart. We don't trust Wall Street, we don't trust our legislators, and we certainly don't trust BP or Halliburton. Tea partiers are arming themselves in case they need to take military action against the federal government. Trust in our medical establishment is at an all time low. I even heard it said recently, soon after the oil spill in the Gulf, that we can no longer trust science. We can't trust science? As if science itself were out to do us harm.

I worry about this national mood of distrust, because a society in which distrust is the default position is incapable of healing. It is incapable of rallying cooperation from its constituents. It is spiritually unhealthy. On this Independence Day, when we have so much to feel blessed by as a nation, I'd like to reflect for a moment on this national mood of distrust, the heavy toll it takes on society, and whether or not it's warranted. What has gotten us to this place?

According to Carolyn McLeod, writing for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trust/>), there are four elements that determine our level of trust in someone or something. Maybe if we tease them apart we can look at what's currently

missing or skewed. McLeod writes that first of all, society has to believe that trusting and being trustworthy are valuable in and of themselves. They are in the interest of the public good, providing part of the fabric of society that holds us together and keeps us spiritually whole. Second, the truster has to be willing to accept the degree of risk that accompanies the act of trusting. If you are indeed betrayed, will you be able to cope with that betrayal? What is the emotional cost if you lose, and can you risk that? Third, the person or entity being trusted needs to be seen as trustworthy. In other words, is there a decent track record of integrity and reliability? What is the trustee's level of skill with handling this kind of challenge? And lastly, trust requires that the truster be able to develop a trusting attitude. How likely is it that the truster's default position is one of trust, and not distrust?

Notice that each of these elements requires a certain optimism about human nature. The degree to which an individual is able to develop a trusting attitude is in part a matter of faith. Dr. James Fowler wrote that the very first level of faith development in the infant involves the degree to which she begins to believe that the Universe and the people who inhabit her world are indeed trustworthy. Individuals who have not had their primal needs met as infants; people who have suffered abuse, or neglect, or trauma; people who have seen life-long discrimination, may have an existential lack of trust that permeates their relationships. To a lesser extent, I would argue that my generation, the Boomers whose formative years included Vietnam, Kent State, My Lai, and Watergate, had our ability to trust authority seriously damaged. We became wary, suspicious, and pessimistic about leadership and authority. Not only that, but we were taught to believe that our lives should not present us with risks. Risk was a thing our parents and grandparents had to deal with. Spiritually, we became a

generation withdrawn into itself, creating our own personal spiritual paths because, duhh!, who else's religious experience could we trust? No one over thirty, for sure.

I sometimes wonder to what extent our generation drives this national default position of distrust.

When we give someone our trust, there is a rational part of our brain that measures that person's skill level and their ability to get the job done. In other words, we rationally consider the person's level of reliability. But there's an irrational part of our brain that asks, how much does this person care about me, about how the outcome of their actions will affect me, about how I will feel? While we may in fact believe someone to be reliable, it is much more difficult to believe they care. Those who approach life from a default position of distrust often need a *lot* of evidence that the person they trust actually *cares*. That is the hugest risk. It is what changes a mere disappointment into betrayal of trust.

We cannot will ourselves to trust someone. Because of this irrational factor of *care*, trusting will always be a gut reaction, not a rational decision; closer to an emotion than a thought. So in a sense, asking what an appropriate level of trust *is* is irrelevant. Yet we can look at those things required to see where we may have failed as a society. Have we, as parents, families, as a society, provided an environment within which people *can* trust? Have we adequately assessed the risk of failure, or do we assume there should never be failure? Have we held those in authority accountable to an acceptable level of trustworthiness? In other words, are they reliable and do they care about the results of their actions? As I've watched Obama's approval ratings slip, I've noted that people do not seem concerned about

his knowledge, skills, or reliability. They worry that he just doesn't care about how his actions affect them. It's a gut feeling.

Above all, is this a society where we consider it to be of value to trust and be trusted? Are they virtues to be encouraged? If so, then as a faith community, we have a moral imperative to use our own places of authority in spiritually healthy ways. Whether we accept places of authority as parents, as children of aging parents, as leaders in our congregations, communities or places of employment, positions of authority require that we create environments within which development, problems, and the stresses of change can be held. We have a choice as to what will bind us together in those environments. Bonds can be made of fear, anxiety, manipulation, or coercion. They can also be made of trust. A spiritually healthy environment will consist of bonds of trust, both given and received. Leaders who are able to consider the factors that lead to trusting relationships, and are able to build trust in their environments will be most successful in introducing and dealing with the tough issues of life. It is the only environment that allows people to truly work together toward a common purpose. And this, my friends, is what creating beloved community is all about. May it be so.