

Sermon

Co-Creating Trust

Sometimes the best thing to do is trust.

Of course, trusting someone is a very vulnerable thing to do, isn't it? We all know, because we all have experience with it, that sometimes when you trust someone, they *don't* come through.

When my kids were small, we had a lot of fun baking and decorating cookies for our neighbors at Christmas time. One year we decided to make some Valentine cookies and mail them to their three aunts, who lived a state away. We created masterpieces with pink and white frosting, with hearts and "I Love You" and smiley faces and curlicues.

We packed them carefully in boxes, with lots of crumpled waxed paper, and walked down to the post office to mail them off.

A week later, we heard that two of them reached their destination intact, and were declared "delicious."

Six months later, the third box was delivered. My sister called to thank me for the box of "cookie dust." The package had been rerouted several times, including through Texas, and it had actual tire tracks across the top.

Once in a while, we are disappointed. But we don't stop trusting that things can work, and that overall, they generally do.

In fact, it appears that trust is essential to a society that works.

This is not a brand-new idea. Many years ago, I took a college class on small business organization. My final project was an analysis of a concept being called, at the time, "the e-organization." There was substantial evidence that an atmosphere of mutual trust is most conducive to business profitability and growth. Companies that trust their employees, taking their

word for it when they say they need a sick day, letting them flex their time and put their family time first, listening to their concerns, find that the increased loyalty their employees feel translates into better productivity, less turnover, and often, innovative ideas that benefit the company's bottom line. Such companies thrive.

The same thing goes for countries. Paul Zak, a neurologist who has been studying how trust works on the brain, has also become fascinated by the effects have on the economies of countries. He says,

"I discovered that trust was sort of the big gun economists have been looking for. It's really the most powerful lever we've found to date to understand why countries are rich or poor..."

Countries that thrive, it turns out, have higher levels of trust, and that trust allows individuals to risk more, to trade, to try new products, to start a small business, to put up venture capital, to open new markets.

New York Times writer David Brooks, in an article last July titled, "Restoring Social Trust is Essential," wrote that the core divide in our politics is no longer the conventional left-right divide. "The core issue in our politics," he says, "is over how we establish relationship. You can either organize relationship at a high level — based on friendship, shared values, loyalty and affection — or you can organize relationship at a low level, based on mutual selfish interest and a brutal, ends-justify-the-means mentality."

He concludes that "The grand project for those of us who believe in a high-level, civilized world order is to find ways to restore social trust. It is to find ways to restructure power — at all levels — in order to re-inspire faith in the system. It is to find common projects — locally, globally and internationally — that diverse people can do together."

He concludes, "In his inaugural address as president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela said, "The time to build is upon us." So it is now. That's the only way to head off a moral race to the bottom."

How do we create enough trust to build together?

Because trust is a complicated thing.

If we are wise, we understand that while trust is generally a positive thing, blind trust can be dangerous. We check out the credentials and reputation of the doctor, the lawyer, the cruise line, before entrusting our well-being or our loved ones to their care. This is wise.

But if we are too untrusting, we may never get the help we need, or take that dream vacation, and that's not good, either.

So, what is trust?

Trust is not something you grant someone as long as they never betray you, never disappoint you, never make a mistake...You can't just watch someone from afar and tally up their behavior until you decide, once and for all, that they can be trusted in all things.

Trust grows in relationship.

Trust is co-created. It happens when someone becomes a tiny bit vulnerable, and someone else responds by not exploiting that vulnerability, but by becoming more vulnerable themselves.

By the time my package got lost by the postal service, I already had a relationship of trust with them. So many letters and packages I sent off in trust had arrived whole, in a timely fashion, at their intended destination. So I still mail things, including packages. Just maybe not cookies anymore. Although this Christmas Ginger and I received a package of cookies lovingly decorated by three of our grandchildren, in *perfect* condition. Trust can be lost, trust can be restored again.

Austin UU Rev. Meg Barnhouse has an interesting reflection on trust:

People will disappoint you, and you can't imagine that they will be like you. I've heard people say "I thought she was my friend!" their voices distressed and sad. "A friend wouldn't do that."

Perhaps that is not how that person thinks about friendship. Maybe a friend would do that, in their system of friendship. Someone wrote that trust meant she could be know that the other person would never hurt her physically or emotionally. It's trust like that that scares me, because when you're in a large community, trying to get things done, talking together about deep things, and we don't know the issues about which each person is sensitive, it's possible that someone's feelings will get hurt. Then they'll think "Oh no! I trusted you!"

In books about trust, people write about public trust and private trust. They speak of different levels of trust granted to different people. Some people you would trust to drive well enough with you as a passenger, but you wouldn't tell them something you didn't want everyone to know. Public trust has to do with trusting people to stop at red lights, to stay in their lane of traffic, not to walk up to you in an airport and hit you, not to get on a plane if they have an Ebola fever. Can you trust people like that? Mostly. So we drive defensively. Because you never know. That driver in the truck ahead of you might have just gotten out of the hospital. She might be addled from some good news or bad news or a six-pack. You need not to cast yourself into the social net unprotected.

Some people you would trust with your life. They can know everything about you. They've seen you at your worst and they continue to love you. They've seen you make bad decisions, they've seen you be grumpy. You've forgiven one another for things because you'd rather go into the future with them in your life than go without them.

Mostly I think you can trust people to be who they are. Over and over. That's a pretty safe bet. You cast yourself into the social net, or into a beloved community, trusting people to be who they are. They're trying.

Even if someone is doing something you think is wrong, you can be pretty sure they are doing it because they think it's best. That doesn't stop you from being able to say "I disagree with you on this one. Can you help me understand your decision to do things this way?" We covenant with one another to disagree from a position of curiosity and respect. We don't covenant never to disagree. That would make for an unhealthy community. We have to be able to trust one another to talk about things.

To trust one another enough to *talk about things*. The older I get the more I see that this is true, for all of my relationships. Because we *will* have things we disagree on. We *will* misunderstand each other. We *will* do things to hurt each other – most often, without even knowing how hurtful we are being.

It's like stepping on someone's toe. I didn't zero in on your toe in coffee hour, and decide to stomp on it. I didn't see the toe and decide, "I'm not going to go out of my way to avoid stepping on Renee's toe." (I don't think I've actually stepped on Renee's toe, but if so I'm really sorry.) I was just intent on what I was trying to do and didn't notice your toe there.

Now, when I stepped on your toe, you may have said, "Ouch!"

There are two ways for me to respond to that, once someone lets me know that I have hurt them.

I can say, "Oh, I'm so sorry! I'll try to be more careful!"

Or I can say, "What's the matter? I didn't *mean* to step on your toe! Don't blame me. Keep your toes out of the aisle from now on."

That sounds silly – I think almost everyone would apologize for stepping on someone's toes. But what if it's someone's feelings?

For some reason, we are much more likely to get defensive if someone tells us we have hurt their feelings or offended them. "Well, I didn't *mean* anything by it." This is the response that does not build trust.

"Oh, I am so sorry! I'll try to be more careful!" – This is the response that builds trust.

Generally, we don't expect each other to always know how to avoid hurting them. They do expect us to care whether we hurt them, and to learn what to be careful of. This isn't being "politically correct." It's being a human being who cares, and it builds trust.

It is inevitable that communities who are taking risks to create Beloved Community will stumble around a bit as we find our footing on new terrain and figure out how to work and create together. As we stumble around, we will no doubt step on each other's toes. It does not matter who is right and who is wrong. We are now living for a relationship, not merely ourselves. There can be no winners and losers. There can be no "my way or the highway."

Here in community, may we trust people to be who they really are, and to care about who we really are. May we be always learning, always growing, always re-assessing and making adjustments. May it be a dance we do together, always changing, always interesting, sometimes difficult and painful, but so beautiful and fulfilling if we engage with each other and the music fully, with care and trust. Let us dance together.