

Christ Presbyterian Church

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Rich Phenow

Proverbs: Trust

Proverbs 3:5-6

There is a story that is told about a 101-year-old woman named Mable. Mable was being interviewed by a young reporter about her life. The reporter said, "Tell me about your life." Mable began to talk about trust and God's faithfulness. She talked about when she was 20 years old and was married. She married a young banker and had an incredible marriage, but it only lasted 20 years. When she was 40 years old, he died. She knew she wasn't destined to be alone so she dated for a while and met another man. This particular man happened to be the ringmaster of Barnum and Bailey circus. They married and had a wonderful, charismatic relationship. The problem was that when she was 60 years old, he died. She married again at the age of 60 to of all persons, the pastor. Another incredible marriage, but in 20 years, the pastor died. She told this young reporter, "I didn't want to be alone." She didn't know how long she was going to live and was living in this senior community, and low and behold, she met a funeral director. At the age of 80, she married. Again, the marriage lasted for 20 years. She had 80 years of marriage to a banker, a circus ringmaster, a clergyman, and then an undertaker. The young reporter said, "Wow! That's amazing. Why did you marry those men?" She said, "I married one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go." *[Clapping.]*

Okay, it doesn't relate at all to the sermon, but I thought it was a great email so I wanted to share it with you. Let's pray together.

Holy God, it is good for us to laugh. It is good for us to worship You and be reminded of Your presence. I pray that You would be in my mind and on my heart, that You would speak through me and in spite of me, that You would speak to us a word from You. In Your Holy Name, I pray. Amen.

We are continuing in this summer series, preaching through some of the Proverbs, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. But it is not old wisdom. It is wisdom that speaks to us today. Proverbs is a training manual on how to more effectively live out what we believe. The Proverbs are instructions for us. They guide us in how to know and love God, how to say yes to Jesus through faith, and how to receive His forgiveness, grace, and mercy. Not because we deserve it. Because it is the nature of God in Jesus. They are all about our vertical relationship, our first step to a full and more abundant life. **The first step for us is a step of faith.** But after we have received this more abundant life, we need **instructions on how to live that life out.** The Proverbs provide guidance and direction on how to live out this relationship in a horizontal way. We need knowledge to know how to shape our thoughts and our actions in our everyday lives. Vertical. Horizontal.

Today we are going to look at the most well-known and popular Proverb of all the Proverbs. I contend that though it may be the most well-known, it is the hardest one to follow, the most

difficult to live out. This past year we memorized the Jesus Creed, the *Shema*. For 40 days some of us recited this wonderful creed of Jesus.

29 . . . 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" [Mark 12:29-31].

This morning as you leave, we are going give you a card with the text for today. To me, it is not as significant as the Jesus Creed, but I want you to memorize this Proverb, chapter 3: 5-6. Put it on your mirror or in your pocket or your purse. I want you to tape it right next to the air conditioner vent in your car, something we've been looking at a lot lately. The truth of the matter is, this Proverb is a powerful Word for us. It is difficult, but I pray that as we memorize it, it will become part of the fabric of our very souls. Repeat it after me. *[Slide shown.]*

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **6** in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

[All:] Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

What's happening in this third chapter of the Proverb is that Solomon is giving his son advice. In verse 1, he says,

1 My son, do not forget my teaching

"Don't forget this fatherly advice. It's advice about not worrying. It's advice about how to make decisions. Son, if you do these things, if you let love and faithfulness never leave you, if you trust in God with all of your heart," he says,

2 . . . they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. **3** Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.

"If you live out these words," Solomon is telling his son, "You will experience greater peace and tranquility in your life." A simple roadmap to navigate life, to help us make decisions, to help us be free from worries and fears and of always needing to be in control of our lives, but it's not simple. It is extremely difficult to develop this posture of trust, of letting go, of being in control, of completely opening our hands and our hearts to God.

Now I wasn't an English scholar. In fact, I'm not sure I was a scholar, but let me give you a little grammar lesson this morning. I want us to look together at the four action verbs from the text for today because they will help us live beyond the daily grind of our worrying. *[Slide shown.]*

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **6** in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

The first action verb is *trust*. The second is *lean not*. The third is *acknowledge*, and the fourth is *make straight*. The first three action verbs, *trust*, *lean not*, and *acknowledge* are actions for us

to take. They are up to us. The fourth, *make straight*, is all about God's promise to us. Alongside these four action verbs, there is this possessive pronoun, *your*. The word *your* appears four different times. "Trust in the Lord with all *your* heart," "lean not on *your* own understanding," "in all *your* ways acknowledge Him," and "He will make *your* paths straight." This isn't about them. It's about you and it's about me.

Let's begin by taking a deeper look at trust. Solomon said that we are to trust the Lord with *all* of our hearts and then we will encounter greater peace and tranquility. What I want you to know is that heart trust is an exercise. Heart trust is about working. It is not an intellectual pursuit. It is an actual posture we are to take. The Hebrew word for trust literally means to throw yourself down on your face. It's to do a complete belly flop in front of God with everything that makes up who we are. All of our sins, all of our fears, all of our failures and shames, all of our doubts. We are to completely submit ourselves in a posture of total dependence and belly flop before God.

Now, this wholehearted thing is not about this organ pumping in the middle of our chests. This wholehearted trust is an aerobic, whole-person kind of a thing. It's about our wills and our minds and our emotions and our personalities. It's about not holding anything back that defines who we are. It's about not holding onto the obstacles that keep us from trusting God, the obstacles of our pride and self-centeredness, the obstacles of our fears and doubts. When we trust with all of our hearts, we are in a posture of risk. We choose to be vulnerable. We take a big piece of who we are out of our own hands and put it in the hands of God.

About 15 years ago, Jody and I were asked to lead a family retreat up at Grand View Lodge in Nisswa for Family Fest Ministries. We spoke together for the weekend, but at the worship service on Sunday morning, I was asked to do the children's sermon. Now here is something that you need to know about children's sermons. They are the most difficult part of a service. The reason is, anybody can preach to adults, you don't even listen anyway, but kids are listening and they are expecting something from you. They are difficult to do and I, literally, lose sleep over children's sermons. So I prepared this sermon. It was going to be a reality children's sermon, a sermon that unfolded in front of the kids. I had never practiced or rehearsed it, a big, risky thing to do. Actually, kind of stupid in some ways. It was about trust. So here I am and it's about this passage, "Trust the Lord with all your heart." At this time, our oldest, Josh, was 7, our middle son, Jesse, was 5, and Kiersti was 3. I get Josh up and I say, "Josh, do you trust me? You know I love you. Remember the time I caught you when you fell out of that tree?" He says, "Yah, I do trust you, Dad." I say, "Fold your arms, close your eyes, and fall back." Josh was 7 at the time. He looks over his shoulder, an are-you-really-there look. He hesitates. "Josh, c'mon buddy, you can trust me." He leans back but he catches himself. He doesn't let me catch him. I'll tie that in later somehow, I think.

Then the middle guy gets up, Jesse. A little guy built like a rock, a little hydrant. Almost no neck. He gets up there, 5 years old. "Jesse, Jesse, you know all the times we threw the whiffle ball together. Do you trust your dad?" "Yeah." "Do you know I love you?" "Yeah." "Then fold your arms, Jesse, close your eyes, and fall back." Right away he folds his arms and closes his eyes. Then he opens up one eye. He hesitates a little bit. "C'mon, Jesse. You can do it, buddy. I love you. I'll catch you. Don't worry." Finally after about two minutes of coaching and a lot of encouragement, he falls back and I catch him.

I get the three-year-old, Kiersti, up. "Kiersti, you know daddy loves you, right?" "Yes, daddy, I know, I know." "Daddy loves you. Honey, I want you to fold your arms, close your eyes." And

even before I could say, “Fall back,” she falls back, and I have to dive to catch her. Suddenly the realization comes to me that the younger we are, the easier it is for us to trust. The older we get, the more cynical we become and the less trusting. In fact, almost the more we know, the less trusting we are.

So the truth is, the kind of trust we are being asked by Solomon to have is this sold-out, game-changing, arm-folded, falling-back, eyes-closed, wholehearted kind of trust. But it’s so hard to do, isn’t it? Let’s be honest. It’s because we have to relinquish control. But the truth of the matter is, God has never dropped us. God has never fumbled us. He catches us all of the time, 100 percent of the time.

Trusting God involves the next two action verbs, *lean not* and *acknowledge*. In order to deepen and develop trust, we’ve got to take ourselves out of the equation. We must lean not on our own understanding. We can’t depend on our intelligence, insight, perception, or our opinions and abilities to solve problems. We need to do our part by engaging our minds and hearts, but not at the exclusion of acknowledging our faith in an all-powerful God. When we depend solely on our own understanding, which is limited by us because as Paul says, we only understand part of it, we become exhausted.

Speaking from experience, the most difficult part of recovering from hip replacement surgery is not the surgery. It is the two weeks following it that you have to spend on crutches. It is the fact that you can’t put any weight on that joint for two weeks. During that time I was a caged, crazy man. I had to get out every day and go around the block to keep moving. But what happened was, I would get exhausted. I would, literally, have to put all my weight on those crutches and lean on the crutches. The fact of the matter is, what trust and leaning not on ourselves requires is a constant conversation with God. It requires prayer. It requires a shift that takes place, us giving greater priority to God, greater confidence in God’s promises and character and power and proven faithfulness, over and over in our lives. Jesus had to have that same kind of trust. He had to trust His Father. He had to open His hands and allow Himself to be nailed to the cross for us. He had to trust His Father. Jesus said this in John 14,

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God . . .

“My Father, and”

. . . trust also in me.

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

“If you do that, I will give you a peace that the world can’t give you, so don’t let your hearts be troubled and don’t be afraid.” Jesus is telling us that we have to trust God, His Father, and we have to trust in Him, Jesus. In the 6th chapter of Matthew, Jesus said this,

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So the question becomes, whose kingdom are we seeking? If we are seeking the kingdom of Jesus, then it’s a kingdom of letting go. If we are seeking our own kingdom, it’s a kingdom of

holding on and being in control. But if it's letting go, it's letting go of the habits that consume us. It's letting go of the things that we spend our time on. It's letting go of the addictions that we have. Whether they are addictions of the internet or Facebook or alcohol or gambling or pornography, we need to let go of them and admit we need help. And we need to get help.

I don't know if you saw the news a couple of weeks ago, but there was a fire in a man's house in St. Paul. The man died just on the inside of the door from smoke inhalation, and the reason he died there was because he was a hoarder. He couldn't open the door because his house was full of so much junk. I think of that image and say to myself, "What are the things we are hoarding? What are the things we are holding onto? Are we holding onto a grudge? Are we holding onto bitterness? Are we holding onto past hurts? Are we holding onto unforgiveness?" The kingdom of Jesus is a kingdom that lets go. It's not a kingdom where we need constant recognition for our egos. It is not a kingdom where we have all the answers. It's a kingdom of submitting, of belly flopping on our faces, in dependence on God.

This past week I was in one of those huge box stores. I was looking for some biscuit mix. I knew right where to go, I knew the cooking aisle where this product was supposed to be but, doggone it, I couldn't find it. I looked everywhere but it just wasn't where it belonged. It must have been moved. I saw an employee and said, "Hey, sir, I'm looking for this product. Could you tell me where it is?" He said, "Oh, let me take you there." I immediately became uncomfortable, thinking "I can figure that out. Just point in the direction. I don't need that kind of help. Just let me know where it is." I've got to be in control. I've got to find the product myself. I'm much better at holding the map. I'm much better at holding onto the compass because then I'm responsible and in charge of my trip and my destination. But we follow a God who is not about maps or compasses. He wants to be the guide. He wants to be the one to lead us in the right direction.

That that first action of achieving wholehearted *trust* in the kingdom of following Jesus is *leaning not* on our own understanding. We need to lean into the kingdom that Jesus brought for us. The second action is *acknowledging* God in all the activities of our lives in order to grow and trust. What this is about is developing the ability to see God at work in everything and in everyone around us in all circumstances. It's a perspective that looks around with open eyes and hearts at the very nature and goodness of God at work around us all the time. It's about seeing God's handiwork in creation. It's about seeing His handiwork in the uniqueness of people.

Yesterday morning I was in my vegetable garden. I picked four beautiful zucchinis and I grabbed three of the greenest, shiniest, most beautiful peppers. They even smelled like green peppers. Right away I said, "God, thank You for the soil and the sun. Thank You for the seed and the rain." Those green peppers to me are about God. It's about acknowledging His goodness in those peppers.

The word *acknowledge* comes from the Hebrew word meaning to know. Acknowledging God is about getting to know Him intimately through His work. It's about understanding His values, His character, and His plan for us in all aspects of our lives, in all the decisions we need to make, and in all the worries we have. We get to know the character of God when we open up the Bible, when we read the story of Jesus. God desires us to come to know Him and develop sensitivity to see and acknowledge Him at work all around us.

The apostle Paul was totally sold out for God. In 15 years of ministry, Paul evangelized most of the Roman world. He wrote one third of the New Testament. He was busy, but he said his No. 1

priority was knowing Christ. In Philippians 3, Paul said everything he accomplished, all these great things, all these people he brought to Christ, were meaningless compared with the greatness of knowing Christ. For him, it wasn't about following rules and certain religious behaviors, but about becoming right with God. It was all about trusting and knowing Christ. For us, it has to be all about getting rid of our hurried sickness, letting go of this measure and standard we have created that says, "The busier I am, the more important I am."

It's about spending just ten minutes every morning reading God's Word and letting it speak to us. It's about devoting ourselves to ten minutes reading *Our Daily Bread*, a powerful devotional. It's about spending ten minutes praying and having a conversation with God and keeping a prayer journal to track and follow God's responses to our prayers. It's about acknowledging God and coming to know Him in all circumstances.

This past week I got a call from a young man named Michael who had been at a funeral I had just done. Michael said, "You don't know me, but I just wanted to call you and say I'll never forget what you said." Now that's scary to me, but being a wise man and growing in knowledge, I immediately said, "And by the way, what *did* I say?" Because he's going to quote me now. He told me, but what he heard wasn't what I said. I told him I never said that. The Holy Spirit was speaking a word to him that had nothing to do with what I said. I acknowledged that it was God working and not Rich Phenow.

Let me tell you, that's why I love ministry so much because many of you come and tell me stories about God showing up in your lives. I listen and go, "Wow! God, You are really, actively involved in our lives." As followers of Jesus, we are to *trust by leaning not* on our own understanding, our own abilities. We are to *acknowledge* God in His creative ways, and they are creative. Then God takes action. He keeps His promises and *makes straighter* our paths. He will help us follow His path as we get to know Him better. He doesn't promise an easier path but a path that's a little bit straighter than the one we are on. It's not a path where we are in charge of the direction or the destination, dependent on our own abilities. It's a path where we are dependent on God, doing a belly flop in front of Him. We are a copilot, riding shotgun in the second seat of the tandem.

I think our paths look a lot like a highway I drove that I will never forget, the Beartooth Highway. It goes from southeast Yellowstone up through this pass and down to Red Lodge, Montana. I drove it with my wife and a van full of kids from eight in the evening till six in the morning. It is the most treacherous road I've ever been on. I mean, there were hairpin turns, switchbacks, blind curves. In the middle of the night I ran into a herd of elk. I got to the top of the pass and there were whiteout conditions in the middle of July. I was so happy to arrive at our destination, I kissed the ground.

I think that is a lot like paths where we are in charge, where we are in control. The Beartooth was the most scary experience I've ever had, but I think God's path is a lot more like the North Shore Scenic Drive, where the road is straight because they used dynamite to go through big, huge rocks. I think God's path is a lot more like the Ventura Highway that I hitchhiked all the way from the Baja to Oregon, scenic, beautiful, and not filled with worry or fear. I think on God's path, there are rumble strips on the sides of the roads. Those are the things that when you drive over them, it feels like your car is going to fall apart. I think God puts those rumble strips on our paths so we don't take all those crazy detours, all those hairpin turns. Let me give you a visual image of what I think trust looks like.

This past spring our three kids were in South Africa together in Cape Town. Josh, our oldest, was there on a study abroad program. Kiersti was there for five months, doing some youth mission work and in May, Jesse, our middle child, went to visit them for ten days. These three took a ride up the Eastern Cape for four hours to get to a place to do something that they told us about afterwards because they knew we would have been worried like crazy. Here's what they did, all three of them.

[Video shown.]

Just watch that. The tallest bridge. The longest bungee jump. Backwards. The kid is crazy like his mother.

[Video ends.]

That's what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about belly flops. I'm talking about a backward flip and knowing that we're connected to this cord. We are connected to this God who loves us more than we could ever know or imagine. We've just got to trust that. Amen?

[All:] Amen.

Praise God!

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.