

July 31, 2011  
Pentecost 7, Proper 13, Year A  
Genesis 32:22–31  
Romans 9:1–5  
Matthew 14:13–21

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes our national politics really disturbs me. Does it ever anger you? Frighten you? Sadden you? I've had all those feelings watching the debt ceiling crisis. Congress and the White House have devoted several weeks, full of drama and emotion, trying to cut a deal to raise the debt ceiling and at the same time reducing future government debt.

Some say that the crisis is not real, that we don't really have to raise the debt ceiling, that it doesn't matter. Perhaps they are correct. But even if they are correct, this story would still bring me down.

Some say we need to cut spending only. Some want huge cuts, and others want smaller cuts. Some say we need to raise taxes. Some say given the fragility of the economy now is not the time to cut spending or tax more. I say that the best way forward is the Davenport plan. You snicker because it's not as good as your plan. Possibly. My bet is that neither of us is going to get our way.

The issues are confusing and complex, lots of technical and arcane language, and this allows for deceptive tactics and claims, much sleight of hand. There's much uncertainty and anxiety about whether we'll get a deal, and all the anxiety clouds our judgment and makes us testy.

Before I went to seminary, I was a reporter for a couple of years, and my beat was the federal budget. I know that these fights are hardly unusual. What I wonder about, worry about, what brings me down is that making a deal seems harder for us, that our politics has less trust, that we trust our politicians less and our politicians trust us less and trust each other less, reflecting a reduced trust Americans have of each other. Politicians mostly reflect the norms and behaviors and attitudes and values of the wider culture. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Politics is noble, honorable work, even if it's sometimes done less than nobly, less than honorably. The word "politics" comes from the Greek words for citizen and city. It's the art of how groups of people live together, hopefully in a way that people thrive, have better, more meaningful lives.

For people to live together and thrive, we need to trust one another. Trust is the real currency by which things happen, by which things get done, that is

people living up to their word, being reliable, dependable, people caring for each other, sacrificing for each other. The more trust, the better we work together. Trust bridges the gaps between people, overcomes our separation. Without trust, there's no cooperation, only competition; no unity, only division; no confidence, only fear.

On the surface, the political fight is about money, but what is money? Dollars are printed on paper. Other than the paper, there's no inherent value in them. Few dollars are paper bills. Most are electrons, numbers that pop up on computer screens, and then either with a swipe of plastic or a few keystrokes we transfer to them to different electronic accounts. It's a system entirely built upon trust. The real currency is trust. Money can't exist without trust.

And to some extent, the more trust we have in our culture, the more valuable our money, and I'd bet the farm that if we can't trust each other enough to make a deal to raise the debt ceiling, then the value of our currency will fall. People throughout the world will trust it less because they can trust us less to handle our disagreements. That may partly explain why the value of gold has been rising.

Even if you could trade a dollar in for a piece of gold, as you used to be able to do decades ago, what you are doing is trusting that gold will hold its value, and that's trusting other people to continue to value gold, even though gold has limited utility. As best I understand it, people value gold because it's relatively rare and pretty to look at, just like diamonds, silver, platinum, and there's a long history of people valuing it. We trust people to continue to value these things. Our trust gives them value even though their utility just isn't that great.

In Jesus' day, currency itself was often copper or silver, coins minted with images, often images of the emperor or gods. One Roman coin had the Emperor Nero on one side, and on the flip side was the goddess Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. She was often depicted on coins holding wheat sheaves. The coin said on it, "the annual harvest of the Emperor."<sup>1</sup> The message: emperor was the divine agent for providing food, and indeed many Romans received free wheat, and later, in the third century, they received free bread. They made the connection of bread coming from heaven, a gift of God.

Today's gospel begins just after Jesus had heard that King Herod had killed John the Baptist. Jesus has been teaching, and upon hearing this news he wants to be alone. Repeatedly in his ministry, Jesus sought solitude. He went off to escape for a time the clatter and distractions of the world, to go inside himself, to connect with God, to renew his sense of mission. Rest, retreat, prayer – these are essential to help us see the big picture, what really matters in life. In our daily routines, we tend to allow the petty to become too important

to us. Quiet and solitude help us go deeper, to be with our real self, to find real value.

Jesus went off into the desert, but he's not successful in having much solitude. Soon, the crowds are hounding him. He doesn't get irritated, but rather he is moved with compassion for them. People are so desperate that they've followed Jesus into the wilderness, a place of hardship, challenges, temptations, wandering, uncertainty. The wilderness is where Israel meets God. The wilderness is the metaphor for our lives. Wandering in the wilderness is our journey through life, and we discover, like Israel, that God is with us as we journey to the Promised Land, to heaven, to God.

In the wilderness, Jesus reaches out to the people and heals them. In the wilderness, God had sustained Israel with manna, bread from heaven. He provided, and they gathered it up. It's working together. That happens again in today's gospel.

The disciples have tired of the crowds and try to send them away, but Jesus tells them to feed the crowd. The disciples protest - "we have nothing to share." Jesus stands firm: "Give them something to eat." Jesus entrusts the disciples to provide. In effect, Jesus says, "Stop worrying about your own survival. God will take care of you. Just stay focused on God's ministry. God trusts you to do his work. You're part of the solution. Do your part." It's the resurrected Jesus telling Peter, who had denied him, "Feed my sheep" - Jesus trusting Peter to do God's work even though Peter has shown himself less than trustworthy.

The disciples brought what they had, five loaves and two fish, to Jesus and he blessed it, he gave God praise and thanks for it, even though it seemed too small, too insignificant, impossible. Jesus' blessing is a sign of trust: we can rely upon God.

The disciples who think that they've nothing to share overlooked their bounty. So often we see our situations as hopeless when they're not. We see our baskets as being empty when they're not. Jesus wants us to see ourselves positively. The disciples did have something to start with - two fish and five loaves of bread, and they had God. Jesus transformed what the disciples had into what they needed and more.

Jesus was teaching his disciples, you and me, to appreciate our gifts, and ourselves, that usually our possibilities are greater than we allow ourselves to imagine. Jesus was showing them, and us, that we can be part of God's work, that we can make a difference. Jesus was encouraging the disciples to change their sense of themselves, to change their sense of identity - to be more positive about it.

Here's the other big thing: the story of the multiplication shows us mutual trust. The good news is that Jesus entrusts the disciples to be part of his work, and the disciples discover that they can trust God. What they thought was impossible became possible when they worked together.

Many of us have encountered situations that we thought were beyond our capacities, beyond our ability to manage or endure, and we have pulled through it. We might understand those experiences as God being with us, caring for us. Trust grows depending upon how we understand our experiences.

One of the reasons we come to church, why we're part of Christian community, is to help us see God's presence in our lives, to be reassured and supported by each other. It helps us trust to God and one another, as God lives in each of us.

I doubt that trust comes naturally, that it just happens. But trust can be learned, nurtured, developed. It can grow, even become instinctive. That kind of learning is part of what we're doing together here. All of life is about learning to trust. Sure, trusting means we may not get our way; things may go wrong; it may cost us. Jesus trusted, and it left him abandoned, suffering and dying on a cross. But ultimately everything turned out well, very well. Let's remember what the pious, religious word for trust is... it's faith.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Jae Won Lee, article in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press (2011), pp. 31

**Please note: during the rector's vacation weekday masses  
will not be celebrated.  
They will resume on Thursday, 1 September 2011.**

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