



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompainst: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

Have a Little Faith

Jeremiah 18: 1-6

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A teacher asked his class of fifth-graders to write about their personal heroes. One girl brought her essay home and showed it to her parents. Her father was flattered to discover that his daughter had chosen him.

“Why did you pick me?” he asked proudly.

“Because I couldn’t spell DeCaprio,” she replied.

How many of us make choices in life, not because they are the ones we really wanted to make but because we’re either afraid to choose and act in a particular way or we simply don’t know what’ll happen if we really choose our deepest heart desires? It’s a little nerve-racking at times, isn’t it, because it’s hard to know who to trust – even to trust ourselves.

Any of you who work in the business world know that one of the elements most missing these days in the workplace is trust. There isn’t the trust of owners and bosses and supervisors that the employees will stay on the job if a sweeter offer comes around, even if that offer is half-way around the world. At the same time, employees don’t trust their bosses or corporations because they could be “down-sized” in a heartbeat, especially if they hit a certain age and/or pay scale that give economic incentive to push them out. Lack of trust pervades so many workplaces, which leads to suspicion of motives, even the motives of fellow employees, which leads to resignation, a “Why should I care?” attitude.

Mistrust is everywhere these days. It’s true in our public life. Have you been to Washington, DC in the last fifteen years? In particular, have you been outside the White House? Do you remember when you could get close to America’s house, before the cement barriers were placed on Pennsylvania Avenue sometime in the late 1980s or early 90s? At that time, we came to a point in our national history where the people of the United States can longer be trusted to drive by the president’s house. Fear, perhaps well placed, has overridden the right of the people to have accessibility to our own elected officials. And so, we stay back and believe that reality is what we see on TV.

Our society has set up so many systems because we don’t trust parents to raise children in the right way; we’ve put up metal detectors in schools because we don’t trust students or visitors; OSHA and the FDA and the FCC are there because we can’t trust employers with workplace safety, that our food will be safe to eat and what is going to be put out over the public airwaves is at least half-way decent.

You get my point. Who can you trust these days?

Now, when we're children, we just can't wait to grow up because then you'll be in control; you'll only need to trust yourself. You're free to be and do as you think best. Which is obviously not the whole case. In truth, our lives are utterly dependent on everyone and everything else, filled with things we have to do, responsibilities we must fulfill, and systems we cannot escape that, even though we may not admire much, we still have to place our trust in them. At the same time, we are autonomous as adults – no one is going to tell us to eat our vegetables, do our homework, go to bed.

The story in Jeremiah reminds us that no matter how independent or in control we think we are, the fact is, we are essentially clay. We are always being worked and shaped, molded and stretched by both internal forces of our own and outside pressures of all the communities of which we are a part. For instance, we are born with a disposition and a personality and a way of being that shapes how we act and interact. We were born into a certain family, with certain ways of doing things and have experienced particular events that shape us down to today. Our race and ethnicity and culture of origin matter, as does whether we live in a city or country and what our experience is with the flora and fauna and topography of which we are a part. All of these forces beyond our control, make us who we are.

But at the same time, like Jeremiah observed, being clay in a potter's hand doesn't mean we're a lifeless lump, at the mercy of forces outside ourselves or slaves to our past. I remember a conversation with Jason Apicella who is an artist and has worked much on a potter's wheel. He said that the type and texture and smoothness or lack thereof of the clay matters – intensely – as to how and into what shape a potter can work things. When he said that, I thought: Maybe the clay has a life of its own and will not be shaped in a way that is not consistent with its own internal consistency. Maybe it's just waiting for someone to help it become what it was created to be.

Is it so different than our relationship with God? We are free beings – created in God's image, to be sure, but unique, with all the smooth and rough places, all the grit and grime and goodness that makes us unique, like no other being in the universe. Who we are effects how we live, our life purposes and the hidden or not so hidden potentialities, as well as how and into what we can be shaped by the hands of the Potter. The question for us on this first day of the new church calendar year is this: are we willing to trust God with who we are – with all the flecks and specks and grit and goodness in order to be molded more and more into the one God is calling forth out of the clay? That's what artists and musicians and poets and potters and sculptors do, you know: they beckon the beauty out of what most of us can't see. They have an amazing gift to see the painting or poem or song or sculpture when most only see a rock or lump of clay or black dots on a white page. There's the story of sculptor Michelangelo who was chiseling a gigantic boulder. One curious neighbor asked him what he was doing and Michelangelo replied, "There is an angel inside and I'm try to set it free."

What is it that God is trying to set free inside you? Or go beyond you personally, and consider what is God trying to set free inside the heart of this congregation? What angel is yearning to come alive, to take wing and fly with works of love, justice and compassion? What can we become as a congregation, what ministries are just waiting to be shaped and molded and set on fire?

It can happen – it already is happening! In addition to all the significant ministries we are engaged in this year, the Congregational Care committee is considering whether to become a Stephen's Ministry congregation. We plan to be part of a mission trip to the Gulf Coast in the spring to help hurricane victims rebuild. And if not these, can you deepen your spiritual life and engage in an ongoing ministry like Loaves and Fishes, Bible study, Thursday worship, teaching, or knitting Prayer Shawls or any of the many other ministries alive here? Yes, the angel inside

can be set free and take wing, if we allow the Potter to do one thing: put us in the very center of the wheel. If the clay is not centered on the wheel, when the wheel begins to turn, the forces will cause the clay that spinning around so fast to splatter all over the place (That was the result of my only experience with a potter's wheel!). But if we consciously seek to center ourselves on God's purposes for our lives and for the world God so loves, slowly, the angel that has always been inside of you, that God has always been calling forth from you, can emerge.

Can we have a little faith in the Potter, that God is able and willing to do just that for you – and for this congregation?

About ten years ago, John Hiatt wrote a song made popular by singer Jewell, which appeared in the soundtrack of the movie Phenomenon. It's called "Have a Little Faith in Me." As I play the song and you can follow the lyrics, imagine God calling you, calling all of us, on this first day of our church year to "have a little faith."

Have a Little Faith in Me

John Hiatt

When the road gets dark
And you can no longer see
Just let my love throw a spark
And have a little faith in me
And when the tears you cry
Are all you can believe
Just give these loving arms a try
And have a little faith in me

Have a little faith in me
Have a little faith in me

And when your secret heart
Cannot speak so easily
Come here darling, from a whisper start
And have a little faith in me
And when your back's against the wall
Just turn around and you, you will see
I will catch you, I will catch your fall
Just have a little faith in me

Have a little faith in me
Have a little faith in me

'Cause I've been loving you, for such a long, long time
Expecting nothing in return
Just for you to have a little faith in me
You see time, time is our friend
'Cause for us, there is no end
And all you gotta do, is have a little faith in me
I will hold you up, I will hold you up
And your love, gives me strength enough to
Have a little faith in me

Hey hey
All you gotta do for me girl
Is have a little faith in me

Isn't it time to put ourselves in the center of the Potter's wheel and let the Potter do the work we so long for, to be shaped into the image of the one who calls us to follow? God can be trusted – with our lives, our loves, our all.