

Trustworthy
Reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 39:1-23
Reading from the New Testament: Romans 15:13

Warren Buffet, the Oracle of Omaha, recalled someone once saying, “that in looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don’t have the first, the other two will kill you. You think about it; it’s true. If you hire somebody without [integrity], you really want them to be dumb and lazy.” I think he may be right about that. If you can’t trust the person, at least the laziness will minimize the damage they can do, and the stupidity would thwart any nefarious plans.

In other words, you’d rather hire Wally from *Dilbert* than Draco Malfoy from *Harry Potter*. Do you know Wally the engineer? He’s certainly not dumb, but he is the personification of lazy and a paragon of amorality. In *Dilbert’s* world, Wally, always with coffee cup in hand, is perpetually finding new and creative ways to avoid doing the slightest work. *Dilbert’s* creator, Scott Adams, says that Wally’s character was based on a coworker of his at Pacific Bell who was continually intrigued by the company’s generous employee buyout program for the company’s worst employees. The lure of the buyout was

such that his coworker intentionally invested his energy and effort into appearing incompetent, rude, and lousy at his job, all so that he could qualify for the buyout program.

And thus, Wally was born. In one cartoon, Wally is giving a Powerpoint presentation to his colleagues. Pointing to the screen which shows the layout of their office space, Wally says, “My cubicle is surrounded by loud idiots who make it impossible for me to do my work.” His pointy-haired boss asks, “Did you create a presentation on why you couldn’t do the presentation you are supposed to be doing?” “Yes.” So, Wally’s boss follows up, “Wouldn’t it have been just as easy to create the actual presentation?” And Wally says, “I’m hoping to use this more than once.” (*Dilbert.com*)

In another cartoon, the first frame finds Wally calling the same pointy-haired boss on the phone while impersonating a corporate recruiter. “I’m a headhunter and I know someone who wants to offer you a better job.” To which the boss responds with an excited “Yes!” In the second frame Wally tells a coworker who was listening in, that he likes to soften up the room before he goes in for his performance review. So, in the last frame, Wally is standing before the boss and says, “I

didn't do squat this year." To which the obviously distracted and giddy boss, daydreaming about his possible job offer, remarks, "Doesn't matter to me." (*dilbert.com*)

Every project manager, coach, supervisor, pastor, nurse manager, team leader is familiar with the business proverb, "Hire slow. Fire fast." Take the time to carefully discern who you believe you can count on, who you can trust. In so many life situations, trust is every bit as important as competence, intelligence.

Some of you know that our son, the aspiring doctor, has a passion for ... rock climbing. *Don't know where that came from. I get nervous climbing these stairs.* But Noah will tell you without hesitation that in rock-climbing, trust in your partner is everything. He says without it, you can never be comfortable on the wall. Of course, Donna will tell you that the only way to be comfortable is for your son not to be on that wall.

It is a delicate relationship between the one who trusts and the trusted. One bears the stress that comes with risk and the other bears the stress of responsibility. Who can you count on? Who can you trust?

How often is the answer the difference between life and death, heaven and hell, being at peace and freaking out?

Surprisingly, in one of the more awkwardly salacious passages of the biblical narrative, there is an important lesson about what it takes to be worthy of trust. Joseph was the kid you love to hate, but to be fair, if pressed, you will confess that it's more jealousy than hate. Joseph was always the guy who could do a perfect swan dive into a cesspool and come out smelling like Chanel No. 5 with a supermodel on his arm, giving all who watched the gift of noticing them, like a president pointing and glad-handing his way down the aisle before giving the State of the Union address. Joseph would preen around in that tacky Roy Williams sport coat that his father Jacob had given him and gladly describe these dreams in which he was always the hero.

Let's just say, Joseph's "I had a dream speech" did not go over nearly as well as MLK's, because in Joseph's dream, when harvest time came, and they were bringing in the sheaves, everybody else's sheaves were bowing down to Joseph's. Nobody likes the chosen one. It wasn't so much that Joseph was being arrogant, he just did not possess the gift of discretion and was missing a few social skills. Sometimes it is better to

keep your dreams to yourself. Case in point, Joseph probably would have been wise not to tell his brothers about the dream where even the celestial bodies of the universe were bowing to him.

In the history of the world, has there ever been a brother who did not consider violence upon hearing such bombast? How many ER visits find a parent trying to explain to a doc how a son wound up with Spalding tattooed on his forehead. “Well, they were just playing in the driveway when the shouting started, something about Noxema; kept shouting ‘in your face’... Next thing you know...” Brothers. Joseph wound up buck naked in a pit, whereupon he was rescued only to be sold into the service of an Egyptian military hero as a slave. Yet, once again, Joseph being Joseph, he quickly rises to a level of honor and authority, and the narrator cannot help but mention that in addition to being reliable, dependable, trustworthy, brave, clean, and reverent, Joseph is a calendar-worthy hunk of beefcake.

This fact certainly did not escape the eyes of Potiphar’s wife and soon what we have is a scene from one of those tacky and tawdry, hairspray-overdosed, 80’s primetime soap operas. Alexis Colby meets

Wally Cleaver. She invites. He resists. She seduces. He runs. She accuses. He gets the Folsom Prison Blues.

You've gotta love Joseph. Whatever filters have faltered in his voicebox, there is an axis of integrity in his gyroscope. God's **yes** to Joseph prompts Joseph's **no** to the spouse of the powerful Egyptian. I can't recall the movie or novel, but I remember a similar encounter where the protagonist is faced with a similar seduction, the tempter offering the line: *No one will ever know*. And the protagonist responds: *I'll know. God will know*. Fidelity. Trust. Integrity. Honor.

The question our text asks is whether the faith of Joseph and promise of God can survive in a world seemingly dominated by self-interest, the abuse of power, and greed. Are the ways of God any match for the ways of empire? Is it possible to be faithful to the way of Christ in a post-Christian, social media driven, Facebook spewing, stock-price-worshipping world where governance and the common good seem mutually exclusive and evangelical religious leaders are out there professing the most un-Christlike attitudes in their quest for power and publicity? Is it naïve to think that Paul's list of spiritual fruit (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-*

control), that these offer the most meaningful and fulfilling way of life? I mean look, it lands Joseph in prison.

But note that imprisonment doesn't change Joseph's character, his identity. Who Joseph truly was becomes transparent to all. "The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper."

Is it naïve to think that Paul's list of spiritual fruit (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*), that these offer the most meaningful and fulfilling way of life? If Joseph shows us that it isn't naïve, what makes the difference?

The strangely salacious encounter with Potiphar's wife is bracketed with the narrator's observation that "the Lord was with Joseph." It is not Joseph's strength that enables him to be the same no matter his circumstances or station in life. Rather, it is the Lord's presence and faithfulness that sustains him just as with the Psalmist – *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;*

for Thou are with me...” Walter Brueggemann suggests that the theological meat of the Joseph narrative is summed up in the words of Aaron’s blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

Is it naïve to trust that our God is trustworthy? Reflecting on a time of great grief following the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?” (C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*) I’m guessing our rock climber could tell you. Breathe deep, Donna! Breathe deep.

I often return to and find immense comfort in this affirmation contained in the Confession of 1967: “The new life does not release people from conflict with unbelief, pride, lust, and fear. They still have to struggle with disheartening difficulties and problems. Nevertheless, as they mature in love and faithfulness in their life with Christ, they

live in freedom and good cheer, bearing witness on good days and evil days, confident that the new life is pleasing to God and helpful to others.”

Is our God worthy of trust? Are you? In our Bible study this week it was pointed out that Joseph’s resistance to temptation wasn’t because he might get caught, or that Potiphar’s wife might hold the threat of exposing their dalliance over Joseph’s head, or that it was unlawful. Joseph resisted the seduction because he trusted God and did not want to disappoint God. That triggered a memory for Marion Kay. She shared with me that when she was a teenager her father told her on numerous occasions that if she were ever in a tight spot/awkward situation to simply say, “My father would not want me to do that.” He said to her, “Blame me. I am here for you.” Marion says she trusted her father who was indeed always there for her. Then Marion asked, “I wonder if Joseph felt that way?” I think he did. Amen.