



TRUST THE CENTER

November 19, 2017, The 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 1: 15-21; Hebrews 12: 1-3

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Theme: *Look back with thankfulness and forward with trust.*

May Your Spirit bear the ancient words of Scripture across the gulf of time, O God. Plant them in our hearts, and there may they bear fruit - delicious and nourishing - in our individual lives, in the lives of our families, and in the life of our church. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Somebody asked me what I hoped for on this day, my last Sunday in the pulpit of Brick. Without thinking through my answer, I said, *“I just hope that there are more people in church on my last Sunday than there were my first Sunday.”*

You’ve granted me my wish. Thank you. I’ve just two messages on my heart that I want to offer you this morning; “thank you” is the first of them.

In the first of the two Scripture passages Yolanda read, Paul says to the church in Ephesus, *“I never cease to give thanks for you.”* For fifteen years, I have never ceased to give thanks for you... well *almost* never. (There were days...) It’s clear from his letter that the Apostle loved that ancient church, and that they loved him back. I’ve come to so love you, and my family and I have felt your love for us. We’ve come to love New York City, a place so unlike the worlds that either Terri or I grew up in. When we talk to friends and family back in the Midwest, they often ask (in overtones of incredulity), *“What do you like about living in New York?”* Of course, they imagine that we live in Times Square and go to three Broadway shows a week, which was their experience of New York the one time they visited.



It didn't take living here very long to know the real answer. More than anything else, what we've loved about New York is the people - hard-working and hard-laughing, inquiring and interesting, loving in the edgy New York way, and so often so deeply committed. Being a church-going Christian in Gotham is something of a counter-cultural act. There's no social pressure toward religious faith in this City; if anything, the pressure is quite the opposite. So in general, folks who are actually in church tend to be there out of real commitment. And the kind of faith you hold isn't afraid to think deep and ask the hard questions.

So what we have loved about New York more than anything is simply you. Oh, we've loved the New York experience. I love the endless array of restaurants, everything from Three Guys to Café Boulud. I love dog-walkers on Park Avenue who are somehow managing to keep six mutts of various breeds from descending into a dog-fight. That's a living parable of New York City if ever there was one! I love a jam-packed Central Park on a Saturday in May. I love being able to buy cilantro at two in the morning if I want to. I love the subway smell that wafts up through the grates on Lexington Avenue. I love being able to walk down to the Met on my Monday off. I love the energy of the City, the fact that the bar is set high for most everything in this town. Indeed, I know that New York standards have kept me on my ministry-toes these last 15 years.

But mostly, I really love *this* place, Brick Church – the depth and dignity of our worship, the stunning choir, this glorious sanctuary that I describe as “Scotland goes to Bavaria.” I'll miss Men's Bible Study and Wednesday Chapel. I'll miss the Fall Fling and the Christmas Fair and the Tree Lighting. I'll really miss all the little ones in Sunday School and Day School Chapel. I'll miss the four-year-olds who point at me on the Madison Avenue sidewalk and say, “*Hey, you're the chapel guy!*” So “thank you.” Thank you for indulging me new ideas. Thank you for listening to the 450-some sermons I've preached from this pulpit. Thank you for generous hearts and courageous minds. And thank you for loving me and loving my family. All three of our kids are or have been members of Brick Church; one was confirmed and ordained here, two were married in this sanctuary. You've let Terri and me into your lives, both in moments of joy and those of pain. What a privilege. So my first message to you this Sunday is simply to echo the Apostle's words to the Ephesians, “*I never cease to give thanks for you...*”



If that first word looks back, my second word looks forward. Early last spring, when I decided that the time had come to set my retirement date, I began to wear a bracelet on my right wrist. I bought it here at church one day. Christina Soto and Scott Sergeant's kids, Sonja and Kai, were selling them to raise money for new bookshelves at our school in Monrovia, Liberia, the African Dream Academy. Its' simple – a brass washer on a black cord. I was told these bracelets were high fashion in California. Sonja said they'd stamp a word on the washer, but I had to choose the word. I hadn't thought about it, but the word just jumped out of my mouth: "trust" – T-R-U-S-T. So Kai carefully stamped the word on the washer with a little set of tools. I've had it on ever since.

I mentioned this bracelet and its word at the wonderful farewell party you threw on the 7th. But I didn't note the obvious fact that the word "trust" invites a question. "*Trust what?*" I know what I trust. This morning I want to invite you again to trust the same, especially in the times of change that lie before both of us.

You might trust tradition. Brick Church just celebrated 250 years of tradition. I've never served a congregation that held its traditions more doggedly; I've never served a congregation with such a vast library of traditions. In a world that flirts with the latest new notion every ten minutes, to be deep-rooted in tradition is such a gift. It saves us from being blown about by the fickle breezes of church fashion. But, there's a caveat... If tradition becomes the *center* of a church's trust, those very anchoring traditions become weights, weights that the vessel has to drag behind her. Tradition is indeed precious, but don't center your trust in tradition.

You should trust your leaders. This congregation is blessed with exceptional leadership. I mean the church staff and my fellow ministers and I mean our lay leaders – the Session and Trustees, Deacons and the Transition Team, and dozens of other ever-so committed folks. Do trust them, *but don't center your trust in them*. Faithful and gifted as they may be, they're mortals, every one of them.



You should trust the process that will identify your 14th Senior Minister. Susan outlined it beautifully in her Minute for Mission. Presbyterians fancy themselves brilliant with process. We are pretty good at it, but no process is perfect and you may get impatient it. The Transition Team hopes to identify a Transitional Minister fairly soon. He or she will then be approved by the Session of the Brick Church and the Committee on Ministry of New York City Presbytery. Then, after I ride into the sunset (literally), Brick's All-Church Nominating Committee will put together a slate of nominees to form a Pastor Nominating Committee. Then you - the congregation - will need to vote to approve that important committee. Once duly elected, they'll set to work, buoyed by your prayers, to scour the land for the right person to serve as Brick's new installed Senior Minister. And finally, that candidate will be presented to you, the congregation, for your vote. All this searching and interviewing, vetting and voting takes time. It's a really good process, but it's not perfect. *Do trust it, but don't center your trust in it.*

Finally, you should trust this beloved community, the congregation of the Brick Church. In each New Members Class at Brick, we sit in a circle and everyone says why they're joining. Without fail, the common thread is their search for community. Ironically, New York can be an isolating place. People live right on top of each other and don't know each other.

I've often spoken to you about the truth that human relationships - family, friends, church - are not some mere add-on to life. Relationships are what make us human. I've never served a church where relationships, *community* - this precious network of love and friendship - have been more a part of the place's identity. But I must remind you that even community can become an idol, a substitute for the real thing. Important as relationship are, church is *not* merely about community. So love it well, but don't center your trust in community, not even the church community.



Nobody knows who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews from which Yolanda read the second Scripture passage that I chose for today. Hebrews is a wondrous-strange book. Its language is mystic and mythic, often a bit cryptic, but the book consistently focuses on one thing, just one person – Jesus Christ.

In those three verses we heard, the anonymous author talks about unnamed challenges that lie in the path of his readers. He turns to an athletic metaphor and writes. *“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”* Like those ancient Hebrews, you’ll need some perseverance for the race set before you, Brick Church. But that’s not all you’ll need.

The author of Hebrews says more. He writes, *“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”*

So in the “race that is set before” you, Brick Church, look to Jesus Christ.” My washer bracelet says “trust.” It’s Jesus Christ I trust. And it’s Jesus Christ that you are called to trust. My second word this morning to you is as simple as the first, *“Center your trust in Jesus Christ, and none other.”*

At the end of this service, we’ll sing what seems to have become the official Brick Church hymn. *“Lift High the Cross.”*

It’s not lift high tradition;

it’s not “lift high our leaders;”

it’s certainly not “lift high the process;”

it’s not even “lift high the community;”

it’s “Lift High the Cross.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.