“What is it worth?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3/10/24

I have really strong memories of two questions I asked myself as a child. I don’t remember how old I was, or what prompted either, but the questions are seared in my memory. I remember thinking, “Why am I a person - *this* person -and not this dish, or these green beans?” The other question was also food-related, “Is ‘ketchup’ really the name of ‘ketchup’?” Apparently, I took food for thought to a new level. The first question was existential. The second was actually more complicated. What it really meant was, “Who can I trust?” I had learned that my family had some unique terminology, not universally shared. In other words, my parents made stuff up. They lied to me. And yeah, ketchup doesn’t sound like a word, either. All of us have some experience of learning the people we trusted implicitly can be wrong. Then we wonder, what it real, and right, and true?

Those questions are part of our cultural turmoil and division. Who can we trust? What can we trust? Which media outlets? Which leaders? Which stories? We can’t even necessarily trust the pictures and videos we see, because it’s easy to fake just about anything. It’s no wonder that trust in leaders, experts, and institutions has fallen to historic lows.

I remember seeing some story about the lack of trust in religious leaders these days, so I turned to trusty old Google, and typed, “How trusted are pastors?” Did you know that search results will vary? Algorithms are designed to feed you more of what you’re already consuming. Can we even trust Google?

Anyway, I found enough to navigate to the original Gallop article I had seen measuring ethics ratings for 23 professions. It compared data from 2019 through 2023, during which all but one of the professions dropped in terms of overall trust. Apparently labor union leaders got a 1% bump up. Good job. Only six professions were trusted by at least half of the respondents - nurses, veterinarians, engineers, dentists, medical doctors, and pharmacists. But they can disagree with each other, too, so… At the bottom of the list are members of Congress, at 6%. Just above them, Senators, car salespeople, and advertisers share 8% confidence. Clergy were rated favorably by just 32%, down from 40% in 2019.

I blame Jesus. Maybe he started the downward trend with his stark assessment of the legal experts. He’s talking about the Pharisees, who were very highly respected in the community. They were considered paragons of piety. But Jesus pulls no punches. They cheat widows out of their homes. Ouch.

Then, picture this: Jesus is sitting across from the collection box and watching what people give. No wonder people were throwing in lots of money! Along comes a widow, who puts in everything she has - which is next to nothing. He praises her for giving everything - even what she needed to live on - to the temple box.

I’m getting whiplash here. First, right after Jesus has a good interaction with a Pharisee, he turns around and makes some serious accusations against Pharisees as a group. He judges them for taking economic advantage over widows, but then praises the widow for putting all she has into the collection box. Should the widow be praised for paying into a corrupt system? Should she be honored for participating in the tool of her own oppression? With Jesus, nothing is ever simple.

Who can you trust? Last fall I learned some of the history of Black Presbyterianism in the United States. Black churches had been established in the north, but in the south, following the Civil War, southern presbyteries and synods kicked out the ministers who continued ministering with Black people, which led to the formation of presbyteries and synods that were affiliated with the Northern church. Catawba Presbytery was the longest continuously running Black Presbytery, founded in 1866. They had a vital ministry and witness, providing primary, secondary, college, and theological education to Black people in the South that was otherwise not available or even legal. They raised up strong and dynamic church leaders. Then, they had to make a difficult decision in the late 1980s when the northern and southern came back together. They could dissolve and merge with the local Presbyteries, or maintain their own identity. Who could they trust? Ultimately, they took a leap of faith, and threw their lot in with the project of reunification.

If you’re wondering how it’s been going, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is still a predominantly White denomination, and only 20% of Black Presbyterian churches have installed pastoral leadership. That’s just one measure of the continued inequities. Even so, Black Presbyterian churches and leaders continue to be a strong witness in the denomination, despite historical and contemporary obstacles most White churches haven’t had to face.

Third Presbyterian Church, a Black church in St. Louis, Missouri provides an example. In the early 2000s, while many congregations were declining, Third was growing. They needed a bigger building and more parking. At the same time, a predominantly White church was closing their doors. Their pastor was retiring, and they couldn’t afford to keep up the facility, so they planned to abandon the building to the Presbytery and join another predominantly White Presbyterian church nearby. Instead, Third was given permission to purchase the church building from the closing church.

The story gets very complicated, but to make a long story short, despite continued reassurances to Third’s leadership to trust Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery through the process, when the purchase was complete, Third found that the Presbytery had allowed the departing members to take anything of value - chairs, communion ware, and other items. The building was also in much worse shape than had been disclosed. A week after they moved in, rain came into the Sanctuary through the leaking roof. Besides the purchase price, Third had to take out a huge loan to pay for costly repairs. Who can you trust?

Third was the fastest-growing congregation in the Presbytery, starting a new preschool and other community initiatives, but their loan payments of $40, 000 to $50,000 a year became particularly prohibitive when the pandemic hit. The pastor turned to the new Presbytery leader to ask about possible Presbytery support for having the loans paid off or forgiven. This led to a deeper examination of the circumstances of the debt, revealing numerous ways the Presbytery had misled the church and essentially abandoned them to a bad deal 17 years earlier. Who can you trust?

It took time, but eventually, the Presbytery voted to assume the remainder of the loan and repay Third Presbyterian Church for the loan plus interest it had paid out over the years. This was huge - representing 13% of the Presbytery’s assets, but it also put the Presbytery’s money where its mouth was, a stated commitment to anti-racism and racial justice work.

Then an amazing thing happened. After the vote, but before the Presbytery processed the checks, they received a large estate gift, covering the total cost of the payout with a few thousand dollars left over. Some called it a true miracle. Many celebrated that the Presbytery had done the right thing to repair this harm. But not everyone.

The pastor of Third Presbyterian responded: “Change only occurs when you are impacted financially, or physically. With this money showing up, the presbytery was never really impacted.” He went on to say that when someone asks him what it feels like to be debt-free, his response is this: “That’s like asking a slave the day after he is released, ‘How does it feel to be free?’ I have never ministered without a mountain of debt. What your Whiteness wants is for us to be celebratory; we are not. We are trying to get over the fact that a presbytery we have lifted up and did all this labor for has deliberately harmed us. It is tough now to say the presbytery is our ally.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Who can you trust?

That’s not the question we’re supposed to be asking today, though. We’re supposed to ask, “What’s it worth?” The last two pennies of the widow - all that she had to live on - were worth more than all of the lavish gifts that had been thrown in the collection box that day. When the Giddings-Lovejoy vote was taken, it represented 13% of their assets. In the end, the same amount of money was paid out, but with no net loss for the Presbytery. What is it worth?

Jesus didn’t come to tweak the systems. He came to live out God’s world-turning love. That kind of transformation entails radical change, and for those who benefit from or are mostly comfortable in the status quo, it’s unrealistic to expect real and meaningful change that won’t feel, well, costly. Our confession last week included this line: “we perpetuate injustice because it is profitable for us.” That’s true in ways we know and in many more ways we don’t know.

What is transformation worth? What will it cost us to pursue, and to follow God’s call? What will it cost us if we don’t? What is it worth?

Getting back to the temple, what’s really going on with the widow’s gift? Maybe she’s doing what she’s been taught to do, what she’s done her whole life - giving to God out of her substance. But it is also a radical act of faith on her part. She’s investing in what she knows the community of God *can* be - one that makes sure the needs of all members are met while also carrying out God’s work of justice and love in the world. Despite Jesus’s pronouncements about the hypocrisy of the legal experts, she doesn’t hedge her bets. She embraces her vulnerability and dependence to participate in God’s work in her community and beyond. It’s not dissimilar to the leap of faith taken by Catawba other Black Presbyterian governing bodies, holding nothing back in trust of the new thing that God was doing in the larger church.

It’s a justice issue when those who have been oppressed, who are already in more vulnerable positions because of unjust systems, are the ones continuing to make the more costly sacrifices, while those who enjoy relative stability and security give from abundance, hedging their bets to protect their own interests.

I don’t know that the widow’s investment or the decision of the Black Presbyterian churches produced fruit worthy of their leaps of faith. Not if you’re looking at the human institutions. When working within imperfect institutions and even corrupt and evil systems, the countercultural call of following Jesus isn’t the same as putting our naive trust in those people and systems. It’s trusting that God is at work, and throwing all that we have into that. Because if God is at work transforming everything, don’t we want to be all in?

Discipleship invites us to go all in with the transforming work of God in Jesus Christ. It’s the invitation to let go of the things we try to control, the ways we seek security and self-protection, and to embrace a radically different way of being vulnerable and interdependent as the beloved community of God. It’s radical love for God and foolishly unfettered love for others. The return on that investment is hard to calculate, but it’s like the Biblical image Bonhoeffer uses to illustrate costly grace: a hidden treasure in a field, worth selling everything to find.

None of this is easy. There is a very real cost to living the life of an all-in disciple of Jesus. That way of life was incompatible with the status quo in Jesus’s day, and it is incompatible in our time, too. Expending the cost seems unwise, given the corruption and lack of trustworthiness in the powers that be. That, and I’d like to keep my pension, too.

Going all in is an act of faith in Jesus, and in God’s ongoing work of re-creation and reconciliation. If we aren’t there yet, we can pray to be on the right path, at least. Pray that our actions are shaped by our love for God and neighbor. We can pray for the moral courage to answer the call of Jesus, in moments grand and decisive, and in our daily lives. I can’t tell you what it might cost, or whether it will bear fruit worthy of the investment, at least in our lifetimes. But living in God’s grace and love, and following the Spirit’s leading as we seek to be disciples of Christ - that’s a precious treasure. May we seek it together.

1. Story and all quotes taken from this article: https://pres-outlook.org/2024/01/giddings-lovejoy-presbytery-pays-718000-debt-in-act-toward-reparative-justice/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)