

The Church of the Pilgrimage
February 12, 2017
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Luke 7:18-25

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces.

Stretched

The story is told of Joshua Bell, one of the best concert violinists in the world, playing for free at a Washington Metro Station. He found a spot, set up shop, and played for 45 minutes on a Stradivarius violin worth 3.5 million dollars. In that time, for that 45 minutes, over a thousand people passed by Bell. Only seven stopped to listen to him play, including a 3 year old boy, and in that short Metro Station performance only one person recognized him.

That story seems in keeping with this lesson today, which is so much about listening, seeing, and recognizing.

And what is it that keeps us so often from recognizing what is right in front of us? Expectations. People expect to hear first year students at Berkley School of Music playing at subway stations. They do not expect virtuosos.

I've spent some time this weekend wondering what motivated John to ask of Jesus that pointed question: Are you the one? It seems, after all, a far cry from the John we think of who leapt as a fetus in his mother's womb, recognizing Jesus identity even in utero. It seems a far cry from the John who spoke of stooping to untie Jesus sandals, who wanted Jesus to baptize *him*. But perhaps the question is posed hopefully. I am here in prison, John is thinking. Are you my cousin really the one? I feel hopeful, but unsure. I don't know how many more days I have to live on this good earth. I'd welcome the confirmation – of who you are, and what you are about.

But maybe too there is a feeling of disappointment behind John's question. After Herod imprisoned him, John had a lot of time to think, about who he'd heard Jesus was, putting that together with Messianic expectations of his time. Then, as now, you see, there was a complicated political situation. In John's time, in Jesus time,

there was a Roman occupation of the region. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was pretty much ruling in the same way his father did - with little regard for the Jewish people, or anyone, for that matter, of little wealth or stature. There was social inequity, vast disparities between rich and poor. It's fair to guess that John would have expected a Jewish Messiah who would redeem Israel from Roman oppression and usher in a new era, the kingdom of God on earth. (*commentary on Luke 7:18-35, Michal Beth Dinkler*)

So maybe, sitting in that prison cell, John gets to thinking about all the miraculous reports – the healings, and even a story of Jesus raising a young widows son from the dead.

It is all miraculous, it's grand.... But, John thinks, isn't there suppose to be more? Where is the kingdom? Isn't it still Herod's kingdom? And above Herod, Rome's kingdom? Maybe John is like the various characters in the Wendy's commercials long ago, the ones asking "Wheres the beef?"

So much of life is about expectations. A young woman goes off to college. Settles into her dorm room, signs up for courses, enjoys the independence of college, the new friendships and experiences that are so much a part of it all. But then it is suddenly midterm exam time. There is so much studying to do. It isn't so much fun anymore. Where's the college ra ra ra?

A young couple fall in love, get married. They each think the other amazing. But the strengths they each have are sometimes major irritants. Over time the spotlight starts to show up some major fault lines. What will they do now that their eyes see the whole picture? And what will they do when they each realize the other isn't changing, at least not any time soon?

Churches have been known to struggle too when initial expectations come up against reality. I have heard of many a church that wanted to grow, that wanted to call a pastor to increase membership. But when the new folks coming in prove not to be of the same background or sensibilities as the folks who have been around a long time, and maybe especially when the whole feeling of the place changes, because you know, you used to be able to come around here and see nothing but familiar faces, well, sometimes people say, yeah, I know we needed to grow and all but why does it have to change everything so much? Nowadays I never go to a pastor's installation service without wondering if they, pastor and church, will survive the expectations they have for one another. If they will forge a relationship based on what is real and honest and truthful as much as what they each believe they have a right to expect from each other. Because it goes both ways. Sometimes pastors expect their church to be something other than what they turn out to actually be.

Expectations. Expectations are the basis of many a performance review, but in many relationships expectations can be what trips you up. When couples come to me to get married, I give them a sheet that contains various quotes and teachings about intimacy – something shared with me, in fact, by Reverend Rosemary MacKay,

a member of this church. So many of these excerpts have to do with expectations, often unrealistic expectations, like I should not have to tell you how I am feeling, you should be able always in every circumstance to intuit that. In relationships it is good to get these expectations out, because sometimes these expectations need to be named for the destructive relationship damaging quality they have. Sometimes these expectations need to change.

The most read article in 2016 was a New York Times article entitled “Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person” by Alain de Botton. All these problems emerge when we try to get close to another person. We seem normal, but only to those who don’t know us very well.

And we often are looking for an idealized person In a spouse, in a parent, in a pastor and there is always the question of how we will relate once we get past that projection of what it is we think we need another person to be for us.

In bible study this week we talked about how when it comes to Messiah’s (or political figures for that matter, or sometimes even spouses) people often want someone to fix everything. When John’s disciples come asking John’s questions of Jesus, Jesus doesn’t proclaim the big fix, as in a whole new system. He tells John’s disciples to go and tell John what they see. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” It isn’t exactly the definition of Messiah that John had come to expect. But these things are certainly healing, hopeful, helpful realities. It may not be the revolution, but people’s lives are changing in very real, very tangible ways. We don’t know how this sat with John. We don’t get his response, or a finished story here. There is just this tension, between what had been expected and what is real.

Perhaps we can see and hear a lot of the church here. We don’t always change the world out there in big radical ways. We begin closer in, with people, with matters of the human heart. Do we want to live with greater self-awareness, with a larger measure of love and forgiveness mercy and compassion? If so, gather around. Listen to Jesus words, and see what following him looks like.

What is interesting is that here in our lesson today Jesus turns questions about him, expectations about him, back to John. Turning to the crowd gathered he asks when you folks came out to hear John, what did you expect to see? What did you expect to hear? A prophet? He moves on to say that John came preaching in the wilderness, a solitary figure that got criticized for that, for being too antisocial while he, Jesus, came eating and drinking with sinners, and got criticized for being a lush. People’s expectations can be so powerful, can have such a hold on them, that they cannot accept the way God is really working in and through human vessels, people who have both strengths and limitations and yet God works through them nevertheless.

Are we ready for a God who will meet us in surprising ways? Some people come to church expecting the gospel to be neat, gentle, nice...but here are John and Jesus

asking each other provocative questions and in the end so much of scripture is provocative, trying to help us sort out ourselves, our expectations, our lives. A sad truth is that often we want a distortion of God, what we might call the Sunday school God, the gentle blue eyed Jesus of those pictures long ago who will take us up on his lap, while we sing to ourselves Jesus loves me, this I know. Maybe as one Facebook post recently offered the church is supposed to be singing not Jesus loves me, this I know --We should, after all, know this by now, but Jesus loves *them*, this I know -- them being the poor, the friendless, the vulnerable, the refugee, those we are inclined to call enemy or stranger or simply "other". Are we ready for a Jesus who will not reinforce our preexisting notions, who was not born into the world primarily to soothe or make nice?

What if, despite the common insistence that the church is not to be a political place, it actually is? Not political in the sense of partisan, but in the sense of having to do with everything that contributes (or does not contribute) to the well being of people. What if, as we insist God is not political, we could imagine Jesus taking us by the hand and leading us to a place where we could see, really see, some things we haven't been willing to see about other people's experiences and there, in that place, learn anew what it means to follow Jesus? As Anne Lamott says, Jesus loves us too much to let us stay right where we are.

Isn't this what the church could be? A place where again and again, we see anew? A place where again and again, we find Jesus showing up and surprising us with the latest disguise?

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, Or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and give you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

There is, or ought to be, a humility that comes in this passage. Our expectations can blind us so that we cannot see the possibility in a moment, the beauty of a brother or sister, even Jesus standing before us.

But there is good news: Jesus still wants us, still calls us. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. God has the audacity to keep working in us, flawed and short-sighted though we may be. There is a God who wants to stretch us, God loves us that much. It is good news. Not necessarily comforting in every way, but good news indeed.

Amen.