

“Expectations”

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God loves you too much to yield to your expectations.

Luke 7:18-35

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Experience and imagination

Expectations are funny things. You can't not have them. You shouldn't not have them. Your expectations are based on both experience and imagination.

If you're a football fan, you have some expectations for later today. Some are based on experience. I don't necessarily expect a "good game," because I've seen many Super Bowls, including the one where my Carolina Panthers played, that were lopsided early and stayed that way throughout the game.

There's also imagination. You may have a favorite team, and you can imagine that team winning the Super Bowl. You can imagine some dramatic plays during the game. You can imagine funny commercials or maybe what foods you might overeat.

Whether from experience or imagination, sometimes expectations fit reality and sometimes they're far from it. Linda and I believed God had called us to leave a steady church staff job in 1983 and go to seminary. We imagined starting a new church in Columbia, SC, while working on the Master of Divinity degree. We had experienced family and churches and friends financially supporting both ministry and training.

Six months later, we were pregnant with our second child, no new "church" had materialized in any significant way, financial support was not nearly enough, our pantry was literally empty, I was working nights at a 24-hour gas station, and I had reduced my seminary class load to one Greek class.

Since we had prayed about these decisions, our unmet expectations weren't just about school and money. They were about God.

You brood of snakes!

From the first couple of verses in our Scripture reading today, it's clear Jesus does not meet the expectations of his forerunner, John the Baptist. Jesus fits neither John's experience nor his imagination.

Verse 18 says, "John's disciples told him about all these things." What things? Jesus' teaching and his miracles. Most recently in Luke's gospel, Jesus had healed a centurion's dying son – from a distance! If that's not impressive enough, the only son of a widow actually did die. Jesus saw the funeral procession and his compassion moved him to raise that boy from the dead.

These two miracles are at a whole new level, and people started calling Jesus "a great prophet" and saying, "God has come to help his people." John's disciples tell him about these events, and he sends two of them to inquire further what's going on.

Why didn't John go himself? Luke told us back in chapter 3 that John was in prison. From other sources, we know where he was in prison – a long way away, on the other side of the Dead Sea, in a fortress on a mesa. John is later beheaded in that prison. It's a fascinating story, one I told in a sermon three years ago. If you're interested, I'll send you the sermon. Luke doesn't tell that story.

But Luke has told us why John is in prison. He had confronted Herod the Tetrarch about his scandalous marriage to his niece, who had been his brother's wife. This is not "Herod the Great" who killed all the babies in Bethlehem. This is Herod Antipas, which means Herod Junior. In my previous sermon I called him Herod the Terrible. His rule was marked by cruelty and corruption, and John confronted him.

So when John heard about Jesus' great miracles, he couldn't investigate further on his own. He sent two of the disciples who had stayed loyal to him when Jesus' popularity soared, even visiting him in Herod's prison. The question he sends to Jesus is, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

There are all sorts of theories about why John asked this question. Two of the most popular are: (1) It's personal. A Messiah releases the captives from prison. John's struggling because Jesus hasn't done that for him. (2) It's political. These Romans are in control of God's people, God's land. Jesus is supposed to free them from oppressors.

In my view, there's a clearer answer, and it might be even more helpful to you and me in our own faith journey. The way Luke tells this story, it's about expectations. Jesus had not met John's. How do we know that?

Luke had begun his Gospel with the story of John, not Jesus. Before Jesus was born, John was born, and his father was told that John would be filled with the Holy

Spirit and would “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Thirty years later, told us back in chapter 3 about John’s ministry. I know that you know John ate weird things and dressed strangely. Luke’s not as interested in Weird John. He’s interested in John’s message. It’s a message of repentance, in keeping with Isaiah’s prophecy: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”

John knows God’s people are not ready. As people flock into the wilderness to hear him, John thunders, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to free from the coming wrath? Do you think you’re going to be spared because you are Abraham’s children? God can make new children out of rocks! If you don’t straighten up God will cut you down like a tree and throw you into bonfire. Stop hoarding your excess and give to those who have nothing. Stop cheating and extorting. Fire is on the way!”

That was John. He wasn’t afraid to speak truth to power, even to Herod Junior, Herod the Terrible. It landed him in prison, and I rather think he was pleased and proud. Herod was the epitome of wealth and greed and corruption and immorality. John’s expectation of Jesus was one of continuity. He would do more of the same. His cousin would bring the fire, clean house. Righteousness and justice would reign.

Since then, Jesus had superseded John in popularity. For sure, Jesus had had a rough start in his hometown of Nazareth, and he had spoken warnings to the self-sufficient. But for the most part, Jesus’ ministry was positive. He was good cop to John’s bad cop. John had confronted the tax collectors. Jesus called one of them to join his apostles, and then had joined a dinner party with Matthew and all his buddies, saying that sick people need a doctor the most. He made sick people well, cast out demons, raised the dead. No wonder people loved him. John wasn’t interested in improving their lives until AFTER they turned to God.

Watch this!

When the two messengers from John find Jesus, he is still among the masses. He’s not baptizing, not confronting. And when they ask him John’s question, “Are you still the One or are we looking for someone else?” Jesus doesn’t answer first with words. He kind of ignores them and does a few more miracles. It’s like he says, “Watch this!”

Then he talks. “Go tell John what you’ve seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are clean, the deaf hear, the dead live, the poor are hearing Good News!” Doesn’t that sound Messianic?

Verse 23 says, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” Literally it means “the one who is not scandalized by me.” John, don’t stumble over your expectations. The messengers leave. We never meet John again in Luke’s gospel.

Jesus, however, doesn't want the crowd to misunderstand. He may be good cop to John's bad cop, but they're both still cops. Many of these same people had been drawn to John as well. He doesn't want them thinking John was misguided or mistaken.

"Why did you go to see John?" Jesus asks. He adds two rhetorical questions. "Did you go to see a reed swaying in the wind?" If you think John's question came because he's fickle, that's not fair to him. He's a rock.

"Did you go to see him because you heard he was a weakling living in a palace?" Obviously not.

You went because you heard he was a prophet. And you were right. He fulfilled Malachi's prophecy to prepare the way for the day of the Lord. (Malachi, too, had prophesied fire and judgment.)

Then Jesus makes this remarkable statement: "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." This is a bit puzzling, but the best interpretation seems to be that John is the last and greatest of the pre-Jesus prophets. Now Jesus has come to usher in a new kingdom, and everyone under his rule will be even better off than the best of those who went before.

John was awesome, but we're starting new, folks.

But Jesus wants this same crowd to know that his ministry of kindness and healing and hope is not all there is to him. He has indeed come to confront a religious system that misses God on so many levels. So now he's a bit John-like as the chapter ends. One commentator called Jesus' ditty in verse 32 "the parable of the brats."

Kids are playing music in the middle of the town, and they expect other kids to play by their rules. When they play happy music, they want everyone to dance. When they play sad music, they want everyone to cry. They're spoiled and selfish.

Jesus confronts those who didn't like John because he was a bad cop, and they don't like Jesus because he's a good cop. They just don't like cops. Wise people, he says, demonstrate wisdom by their offspring – their impact. The wise respond to God, and (here's the point) they don't insist that God meets their personal expectations. They alter their expectations in keeping with what God does.

The supermarket and the church

That's a lesson for you and me from John, Jesus, and Luke. That's a lesson about faith, and it's also a lesson about church. It's about your faith, right now. And it's about this church, right now. So what do we do with this?

I found some perspective in a surprising source this week. For a couple of weeks, I have been listening to an audio book called *The Secret Life of Groceries* (Benjamin Lorr). Our daughter recommended it to me after I got hit with diverticulitis and started talking about healthier eating. I expected the book to give me the back story about why modern food production with all its additives chemicals and fat and sugar is killing us.

I haven't finished the book yet, so maybe I'll take back what I'm getting ready to say, but I don't think that's it. At points it's certainly an indictment of various steps in the transition from living things – animals and plants – to grocery store shelves and coolers and produce displays. But I come away from the book humbled and amazed by all the people and processes that feed a nation, and how innovation in production and transportation and technology create the seemingly endless variety and supply to meet the demand of a diverse population that wants what we want when we want it.

So whether it's farmers keeping 100,000 pigs at a time disease-free or logistics moving out of season produce across continents in a matter of days or grocery execs plotting shelf space by the inch or lower wage earners changing out the ice in the seafood display overnight, most of us never think about the number of people at every strata of society and, more to the point, the systemic precision required to ensure that I can walk into Lowe's Foods and pick up a few perfectly ripe bananas or carton of my favorite ice cream on demand.

If you go back in time 50 years or so, what we know now is food chains and the supermarket are almost miraculous. The same is true of cars and planes and furniture and textiles and hospitality and healthcare. We live in a finely-tuned world that has only raised our expectations for customer satisfaction. I for one am only humbled and grateful that I live in such a world and for the people who make it happen, some of whom I know. It's the world of commerce, which can be an ugly world of survival of the fittest with some people coming out on top and others being trampled, but for the most part we all eat better and live better. We think that industrial mechanization would make workers obsolete, but instead unemployment is historically low, and – although there is much to be done – more people have a higher standard of living.

When I go to the supermarket, they better meet my expectations or I'm headed to their competitor. It's a highly structured world where people might be depressed or disabled or angry or just having a bad day – but they better not show it on their face or lash out in their words or I'm going to whine about it.

So what does that have to do with John, Jesus, and Luke? Just this: church doesn't work that way. Faith doesn't work that way. Jesus doesn't work that way. This is a real world where not even John the Baptist finds that Jesus meets his expectations. And you know that I don't think his expectations were self-centered. He was sincere and biblical and sacrificial, but Jesus disappointed him.

“Expectations” is a valid, relevant topic for this church, right now. All of us, myself included when I’m honest, have expectations for what the next pastor of the church will be like. The difference between you and me is that no matter who the next pastor is, at some point I’m leaving – for your good, for mine, and the next pastor’s.

And I know that some of you will be here for the long haul, regardless. I know churches because I’ve been a student of them for decades. Some of you would be the people who will stay until the pews are empty and the doors are replaced with particle board. Oh wait, that’s already happened. For some of you, this is your “death church.”

But for others, the church is like the supermarket. You’ll be in your seat as long as the church meets your expectations. And when it doesn’t, you’ll find one that does, because obviously your expectations are the holiest. I can’t blame you for that, really. You’ve been conditioned by the supermarket and the financial market to demand results and satisfaction.

This is just a gentle reminder that the church is not a business. We want your feedback, but we don’t do customer service reviews. If you’re in a real church with real people and all-too-human pastors and leaders, we will fail you. And the most important thing that will happen next is not that we do better – even though I hope we always will. It’s what will happen in your soul and with your commitment if you can only see how others disappoint you and not how your own sins and flaws are part of the problem.

The problem and the next step

Church is about failing to meet your expectations because God is also about failing to meet your expectations. Let me say that again, with a little different twist. God intends not to meet your expectations. Why? Because meeting your expectations is not healthy for your soul. And when he doesn’t meet your expectations, the problem is not with God. The problem is with your expectations.

Here’s what I love about John. When Jesus doesn’t meet his expectations, he goes to Jesus. He asks, “Jesus, is the problem with you or with me?” That’s a really honest question, isn’t it? It’s an absurd question, of course, but Jesus would rather you ask it than hold it in.

Jesus says, “Let me show you what I’m doing that your experience and your imagination could never have expected. It’s different, but it’s better. You’re blessed if you don’t trip over your own expectations. I love you too much to yield to you.

In that same story, don’t you love how Jesus also takes the moment to affirm John in the den of his disillusionment and doubt? John’s not a reed, swaying in the wind. He’s not a spiritual sissy. He’s a rock, even more so because he knows where to come for his answers. He’s the best, the best ever. But you can be even better than that, if you stay with me and my kingdom. Amen.