

Giving It Up: Expectations Sunday, 3/12/17

1 It was my first week of seminary, back in the late '90's, and I was really excited about my World Missions class at Bethel Seminary. After only a week, I was so full of facts and figures that I imagined I had already figured out a large part of ministry! Meeting with a more mature friend from Pilgrim United Methodist Church, Bob, I wasted no time in putting my new-found knowledge to work by challenging him on his mission work in Guatemala. You see, after only a week I had already formed expectations around what constituted valid mission work, so I laid it all out there for Bob. I explained the 10/40 Window concept I had learned in class that week: An imaginary window is drawn on the world globe that extends from ten degrees to forty degrees latitude and encompasses portions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The fifty-five countries least evangelized for Christ are in this window as well as over 80% of the world's poorest people. Guatemala is nowhere near the 10/40 window, so I asked him why was he doing missions there, when there was so much more need elsewhere. I sat back, ready to be congratulated by Bob on my educated expectation. Instead, this is what he said to me: "That may be true, Bill, but Guatemala is where God is calling me."

Hmmm.... God's sovereign will- why weren't we talking more about that in my World Missions class, and why wasn't God calling people according to my rational expectations? Bob's graceful and faithful response helped me reorient my life to God's call. He reminded me of God's right to turn my expectations upside down. In fact, shortly after my talk with Bob, God called me to a short-term mission in Guatemala. Isn't it funny how God sometimes asks us to do things that we never imagined we'd do?

Today we continue our Lenten worship series entitled "Giving It Up," examining the attitudes of our hearts that we need to give up and leave behind in the spiritual wilderness of Lent before we're ready to rise from the grave with Jesus on Easter morning. Today we focus on giving up our expectations. When was the last time you examined the heavy load of expectations that you've been carrying around? Each of us carries them, whether we name them or not. Expectations of ourselves; expectations of others; and even expectations of God. Sometimes those expectations are faithful, and we call that hope. But oftentimes those expectations only serve to weigh us down with resentment or disappointment. Learning to

tell the difference between hopeful and hopeless expectations is one of the arts of life that we can all profit from learning.

2 Before we hear our second Bible reading, let's talk for a moment about Abraham and Sarah's dilemma from our first reading. Imagine a moving truck arriving at your door unexpectedly. The truck driver informs you that you're moving, but doesn't know exactly where or how long it will take to get there. The only other information you're given is that you'll be moving far away from your family and that you should trust that God will bless you, because God's blessing to you will become a blessing for all people.

As scary as that sounds, it was even scarier thousands of years ago for Abram and Sarai, who we know are later given the names of Abraham and Sarah. Back then there were no moving trucks and no telephones or internet to stay connected. Moving was a big deal, because by leaving the family property behind, Abraham was forfeiting his inheritance and his social identity. Moving also meant facing the dangers of travelling through a wilderness and assimilating into a new culture. In other words, there were many more reasons for Abraham to not move than to move. Yet Abraham acted, against the prevailing social norms, as well as against his own expectations that God would bless him right where he already was.

My family did something similar "back in the day," not too long in fact after that unexpected mission trip to Guatemala. Once Jana and I opened the door to the possibility that God could and did operate in ways that we didn't fully understand, and in ways that ran contrary to our human expectations, we began to notice more and more that God has a will of his own, and that following God's will is the true path to living a blessed life. So when we saw that God was asking us to "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to rural Kentucky for a seminary education and a vocation that I will show you later," it was a little scary, but mostly it was filled with the faithful expectation that we would be blessed, and that God would bless other people through us. There was plenty of peril along the way and at times some challenges with assimilating into new cultures, but we've never once regretted answering God's call to go.

Has God ever asked you to set aside your expectations of God's plan for your future, moving to a faraway place or doing something you never imagined possible? Is God asking

that of you right now? God can and does interrupt our expectations to accomplish his purpose of blessing us and other people through us. Is there an expectation for your future that you need to let go of today? Write it down on one of those colored index cards and pray about letting it go this week.

3 It was the prophet Isaiah who famously said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. Brothers and Sisters, how many of you have learned that to be a true fact? So often we want life to look like a straight path, and then we’re surprised to find ourselves travelling a twisted tangle. Some of those turns are our responsibility, the result of our willful disregard for God’s instruction. But some of those turns come about because of the way God sees things and the goals God has that are so often contrary to our expectations. Our next Bible reading illustrates this confounding difference so well. I’m reading from the Gospel of John in the NLT, the first seventeen verses of chapter three.

{Read John 3:1-17, NLT}

From the vantage point of history, we tend to be a little hard on poor Nicodemus, because we think we pretty much understand what Jesus is saying. Why can’t Nicodemus? Two times, an exasperated Nicodemus says to Jesus, “What do you mean?” Remember that Nicodemus didn’t have the advantage of being raised in a Christian home and church. He had one huge expectation working against him: that being a biological descendent of Abraham and keeping God’s law would be sufficient to qualify him for salvation. All this talk of being born again by water and the Spirit would have sounded like nonsense to him because, in effect, the squiggly lines of Jesus’ teaching didn’t look anything like the straight line he was expecting.

If we’re honest, most of us struggle to get our minds around even basic ideas about God, like the Holy Spirit and how God can be one person and yet also three persons. So one basic expectation of God that we all probably need to give up and leave in the wilderness of Lent is the expectation that we can fully understand God. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. If you’re wresting with an expectation of your understanding of who God is, maybe that’s something you want to write on an index card today and pray over this week.

4 Occasionally I'll say to one of our church staff members, "You mean you can't see what's inside my mind? Is your crystal ball broken again?" You see, it's not only God who we have expectations of. The expectations we have for others are fertile grounds for misunderstandings and heartache, in part because so often we have such unrealistic expectations of each other, and in part because we typically are such poor communicators and negotiators of those expectations. Reverend Victor Singletary, in his excellent blog, *Ephesians 3:20*, discusses these confounding aspects of expectations as he makes the case for the oft-used phrase in AA circles, "Expectations are premeditated resentments."

[O]ur unfulfilled expectations usually stem from the bad habit of believing that people should read our minds. If they do so accurately, then they would know what we want, when we want it and the way in which we want it. Should we find the wherewithal to tame our expectations, which are by and large unrealistic and impractical, then we can become more open minded. That approach allows for people's intentions, good or bad, their shortcomings, and unforeseen circumstances that prevent their best attempts to fulfill our most reasonable expectations.

There is an old saying, "If you want something done right, then you have to do it yourself." That nugget of wisdom serves as a great prism through which to evaluate our expectations. If no one else can possibly accomplish a task with the care and specificity that we would, how could we reasonably expect someone else to do so? A reasonable expectation flows from honest, open and straightforward communication. Because we fail to inform others of the details, we should not resent their failure to fulfill our expectations. If they do not know the particulars, how could they successfully achieve the task? Nonetheless, we must assume a lion's share of the responsibility upon discovering that our expectations remain unfulfilled.

I'd like you to think about one person in your life right now with whom you have some sort of regular relationship. Perhaps it's a spouse, a child, a grandchild, a parent, a sibling, a neighbor, or a coworker. Let God's Spirit bring one person clearly into your mind. In thinking about that person, I want you to think about some of the expectations you have for them. How realistic are those expectations? Can you meet those same expectations for yourself? Have you communicated your expectations clearly? Perhaps even more

importantly, recognizing that every relationship requires input from at least two people, have you attempted to negotiate your expectations with the other, or have you simply handed them down from on high without any regard for their input or their expectations of you? Healthy expectations of others are the ones that are negotiated in the light of day, not communicated via crystal balls. Give up your unrealistic, secret expectations of others and leave them behind in the spiritual wilderness of Lent. Here's another opportunity to write something down on an index card for your prayer focus this week.

5 There's one more kind of expectation that I'd like you to consider giving up today: the unhealthy expectations that you have for yourself. I'm not talking about expectations like seeking out God, or loving your neighbor. I'm talking about the expectations we've gathered from the cultures we live in and made our own, especially the expectation of perfection. In a world of digital editing, so much of what we see and hear has been carefully edited and shaped into perfection. It's easy to buy into the idea that we should be perfect like the perfect digital people we watch- our bodies, our relationships, our jobs, even our faith. Is there an expectation that you hold for yourself that comes less from God and more from a television script or your childhood experiences? This one might take more than a little self-examination and prayer to plumb. Perhaps you could simply write on your card, "expectations of myself?" and then pray about that.

6 Each of us carries around a heavy load of expectations: Expectations of ourselves; expectations of others; and even expectations of God. Sometimes those expectations are faithful, but oftentimes those expectations only serve to weigh us down with resentment or disappointment. What are the unhealthy expectations that are burdening you today? Let's go to the Lord now in prayer, asking for help in releasing them.

Creator, redeemer, and sustainer, you see and know in ways that we don't. We fully confess our ignorance and our need for your guidance. Grow in us a deep trust and sensitivity to your leading. Forgive us for harboring expectations that have done violence to our relationship with you, your people, and ourselves. This week, even today, each one of us brings to you an expectation that we name to you in the silence of our hearts. We release our expectations to you. Replace them with the hope that comes from walking with you in faith. Amen.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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