

**LENT #6: GIVE UP YOUR EXPECTATIONS
PALM SUNDAY**

(04/09/17)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 21:1-11

“Spirituality is a matter of less, not more.” (Meister Eckhart)

Today is the sixth and last Sunday in Lent. It is also known as Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. It marks the beginning of Holy Week, the last week that Jesus spent with his disciples on earth in human form.

In our worship this Lenten season we have been focusing on the spiritual discipline of “giving up.” We have been trying to identify and let go of our attachments, that which we grasp or seek to control, and consequently that which ultimately controls us. Because this is what happens: that which we seek to control becomes our master; it actually controls us. This is why our attachments cause so much suffering in ourselves and in others. They cut us off from a compassionate, loving relationship with our brothers and sisters, from our deepest values, and from our experience of the resurrected Christ.

This morning we will focus on a theme that is an integral part of Palm Sunday. We will look at the matter of expectations: our expectations of other people, our expectations of God, our expectations of Jesus, and our expectations of life. We will try to discover the ways in which our expectations can become a barrier that separates us from our brothers and sisters and from that God who is the source of all life.

What does it mean to have expectations? How do our expectations of others shape the way we experience them and, accordingly, the judgment we place on them? When are our expectations of others self-centered? How do we know if we have become attached to our expectations? What is our response when others fail to meet or live up to our expectations?

To expect is to look forward to, to anticipate, and to regard as likely to happen. Our expectations can be a beautiful part of life and a meaningful part of our spiritual experience. Think of the eager expectation with which little children await Christmas morning! In fact, expectation, which is sometimes described as longing, is a major theme of the entire season of Advent. During the Advent season, we look forward with an attitude of expectancy to the birth of our Lord in the world and in our hearts.

Expectations can turn our gaze, our attention in a certain direction. A few months ago when I was standing at the Back Bay Station in Boston waiting for the train back to Mansfield, I noticed how everyone was staring down the tracks toward South Station, the direction from which our train would be arriving. People were even leaning forward a little over the tracks as if they wanted to be the first to see the train come into view, though I don't know why this would be the least bit advantageous. We not only expected the train to come; we expected it to come pretty much on time. We didn't expect it to come on time the way the Germans and the Swiss expect their trains to come, for that would be unrealistic, but we expected it to arrive within a couple of hours of the time listed in the schedule.

There is nothing wrong with staring down the tracks anticipating the imminent arrival of your train. It occurred to me, however, that our expectation narrowed the line of our vision. We weren't taking the time to look at and discover each other. We also weren't reading a book of poetry, a newspaper, or even the Bible, which you can read on your cell phone. Instead of looking down the tracks I decided to be somewhat of a rebel and look up the tracks, in the direction our train would be going. I wondered if others might follow my example. No one did. From the expressions on their faces they probably thought I was strange or that I had inadvertently ended up on the wrong side of the station.

While expectations can be positive, they can also narrow the range of our vision. They can keep us from discovering and experiencing the fullness of life that is presented to us.

Our expectations of not only events like the arrival of a train but also our expectations of life can be quite specific. Without knowing it we can become attached to our expectations. When we are attached to a certain expectation of life and life fails to meet that expectation, we feel that life is being unfair to us. We feel that life is unjust, as if that word had any meaning. It may not even occur to us to question whether our expectation is realistic or unrealistic, whether it is healthy or unhealthy.

For example, people who experience road rage have an expectation of how traffic will move. They expect it to move at the pace they would like to drive. If other cars are going too slow or too fast, they become angry. The expectation that the traffic will move at the speed I would like it to move seems like not only an unrealistic but also a narcissistic expectation. As is so often the case with narcissistic people, when their expectations are not realized they become

enraged. This causes suffering for themselves and also for others because they drive like maniacs.

Even if we are not narcissistic, we may become attached to our expectations. We may not even realize how tight or narrow our expectations are, or how strongly we cling to them. As a general rule, when other people do not meet our expectations, we tend to become annoyed or even angry.

I'm sure we can all think of examples of how our expectations cut us off from a loving, compassionate, accepting relationship with others. We may have expectations of each other in our marriages. Some of these expectations may be realistic, but many are probably not. We may have expectations of our children or our parents. Some of these expectations may be realistic, but many are probably not. It is not our expectations but our attachment to these expectations that cause suffering for us and for those we love, those who feel the weight of our disappointed or unfulfilled expectations. We need to identify these expectations and let them go.

Palm Sunday is the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people had their expectations of Jesus. They hailed him as "the son of David," "the King of Israel," the Messiah for whom they longed. There were a plethora of expectations. As Matthew notes, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

The question "Who is this?" is at the heart of our faith as Christians. It puts us squarely in the position of the disciples who were asked this very question by Jesus.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13-15)

"Who do you say that I am?" The Jews of Jesus' time saw him in terms of their expectations. They saw him in terms of their perceived needs. They believed that what they needed was a military-religious ruler not only of the house, of the lineage of King David but who was actually modeled after David. They hoped that Jesus would lead the uprising against the Roman Empire that had oppressed and enslaved their people.

We can't blame the people for seeing Jesus through the lens of their own history. But what if their expectations blinded them to the reality of what was right before their eyes? What if Jesus was different from what they thought and what they hoped? What if he was not the King

of the Jews, not the King of Israel, not the Messiah for which they longed? What if he was the Son of Man and also the Son of God? What if he came not to overthrow the Roman Empire but to show us how to dwell in the Kingdom of God?

On Palm Sunday, the crowd welcomed Jesus with open arms. The more they got to know him, however, the more they realized he was not what they expected. He was not what they felt they needed. His kingdom was not of this world. In addition, Jesus was annoying. He saw through people, just as he sees through us. He admonished the Pharisees, whom he called hypocrites, whitewashed sepulchers. He confronted people on their values, just as he does with us. He angered the keepers of the Temple when he overturned the tables of the moneylenders.

When Jesus failed to meet their expectations, the crowd not only threw him away, they crucified him. Expectations disappointed don't always lead to a self-reflective examination of our expectations and the burden they place on others. They often turn to hate. This is how "Hosanna!" turned to "Crucify!" in such a short period of time.

As we enter into Holy Week, let us examine our expectations in an attitude of prayer and humility. Let us examine our expectations of others to see whether they are realistic or not, whether they are compassionate or not, whether they are based in a loving acceptance. Let us examine our expectations of others to see whether these expectations narrow our line of vision to such an extent that we miss the God-given uniqueness of the other person.

As we enter into Holy Week, let us examine our expectations of life, how attached we are to these expectations, and reflect on how we react when life disappoints us. Let us reexamine our expectations of Jesus, our master and our friend, that we might be open to the mystery of his presence both among and within us.

If we can give up or die to our unrealistic, self-centered expectations, we can discover, we can rediscover each other, Jesus, and this wonderful, mysterious life that God has given us.

Then we will experience the true power of the Resurrection.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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