

LENT #5: GIVING UP OUR EXPECTATIONS

(03/26/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 21:1-11

“When he [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’”
(Matthew 21:10)

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

In our worship this Lenten season, we have been focusing on the practice of “giving up.” As the thirteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart, whom we are coming to know better in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group, has said, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." Buddhism reminds us that suffering arises as a result of our attachments. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world, we need to identify that which we grasp and learn to let this go because grasping inevitably leads to the desire for more control, and control is anathema to love. We need to identify and let go of anything that holds us back from the experience of new life in Christ.

The ego-centric stance that underlies all our attachments is the cause of our suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. Our self-centeredness needs to be replaced by God-centeredness. In the words of the apostle Paul, we need to die to the old self to be reborn, to enter the new life that is offered to us by Christ and in Christ.

The first week of Lent we focused on giving up our illusions, specifically the illusion that we are without sin, because the denial of our shadow precludes our engaging in the spiritual and psychological discipline of honest self-reflection. The second week we examined how our attachment to material possessions can come between us and our brothers and sisters, can gradually and insidiously become our meaning in life. The third week we looked at our obsession with the future, not only those negative expectations of the future that are the root cause of our anxiety, but even those imaginary goals and objectives that become the standards by which we judge ourselves and others. And last week we looked at the way we treasure, the way we hold fast to our resentments, the hurts we have experienced in the past, and the role our resentments play in the way we see life and our life.

Each of these barriers to living the fullness of life as a child of God is grounded in self-centeredness. The solution to each is to learn to let it go. Or, as the Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck has suggested, to “see through them.” When we see how empty, how impermanent our attachments are, they fade away like a sandcastle in the face of a rising tide.

This morning I would like us to examine another barrier that can hold us back from the experience of new life in Christ. This is the barrier of our expectations: our expectations of other people, our expectations of God, our expectations of life, and our expectations of ourselves. I

would like us to discover the ways in which our expectations can become a barrier between us and others, between us and God, between us and life, and between us and the fullness of life that God intends for us.

What does it mean to have expectations? How do our expectations of others shape our experience of them? When are our expectations of others self-centered? How do we know if we have become attached to our expectations? How do we know whether our expectations are realistic or not realistic? How do we know whether they are healthy or not healthy? What is our response when others fail to meet or live up to our expectations?

To expect is to look forward to, to anticipate, to regard as likely to happen. Expectations can be a beautiful part of life and our spiritual experience. Think of children looking forward to Christmas morning! 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. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, writes,

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. (1 Philippians 1:20)

Paul's "eager expectation and hope" was grounded in his faith that Christ's presence in him would help him face his persecutions, even his execution. This is probably how Jesus felt about God's presence in him as he looked forward with a mix of expectation and dread to his last week on earth in human form, as he rode on into Jerusalem to preach, to teach, and to die. Expectation is more than an anticipation of the future. It can be a central dimension of the spiritual gift of hope.

Expectations can turn our gaze, our attention in a certain direction. However, our expectation may limit our experience of that which we seek. This insight was brilliantly articulated by Hermann Hesse in his novel, *Siddhartha* (which, by the way, is my favorite novel, specifically the translation by Sherah Chodzin Kohn). Near the end of the novel, an elderly Siddhartha, who has become enlightened, is reunited with his childhood friend, Govinda, by the side of the river where Siddhartha had his satori experience and where he now lives and works as a ferryman. Siddhartha immediately recognizes Govinda, who left Siddhartha many years earlier to become a monk, a disciple of the Buddha, but Govinda does not recognize his old friend.

Govinda, who realizes that Siddhartha has found that which they both sought as youth, confesses to Siddhartha that he, Govinda, is still a seeker. He asks Siddhartha for some guidance in his search. Siddhartha tells him, "What should I have to tell you, venerable one? Perhaps that you seek overmuch? That you seek so much you do not find?"

When Govinda, confused, asks Siddhartha to explain what he means, Siddhartha responds,

When someone seeks, it can easily happen that his eyes only see the thing he is seeking, and that he is incapable of finding anything, incapable of taking anything in, because he is always only thinking about what he is seeking, because he has an object, a goal, because he is possessed by this goal. Seeking means having a goal, but finding means being free, open, having no goal. Perhaps you, venerable one, are indeed a seeker, for in striving after your goal, there is much you fail to see that is right before your eyes.

So, even for those who would describe themselves as spiritual seekers (and I confess I count myself as one of them), the goal that we seek, the expected experience of faith or enlightenment or whatever, can blind us to that which is here in the present, the Mystery, the Transcendent that is right before our eyes.

When I read Siddhartha's words, I think of Jesus' conversation with the Rich Young Man. The rich young man was seeking the kingdom of God. However, he was so intent of finding it that he missed that which was right before his eyes. *He missed Jesus.* He missed Jesus' personal invitation to him to become a disciple of the Way.

Our expectations can narrow the range of our vision. They can keep us from discovering and experiencing the fullness of life which is presented to us.

Our expectations of people, of life, can be quite specific. Without knowing it, we can become attached to our expectations. When we are attached to an expectation of life and life does not meet that expectation, we become angry. If our expectation is strong enough, and if we are strongly attached to our expectation, it may not even occur to us to question whether our expectation is realistic or unrealistic.

For example, people who suffer from road rage have an expectation of how traffic will move. They expect the traffic to move at the pace they would like to drive. If other cars are going too slowly (or too fast), these people become angry. The expectation that the flow of traffic on the Southeast Expressway will move at the speed we would like it to move seems not only an unrealistic but a narcissistic, perhaps even delusional expectation! Here, as is so often the case with narcissistic people, when their expectations are not realized, they become enraged. This causes suffering for themselves, for passengers in their car, and also danger for their fellow drivers.

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

When this happens, our focus on other people (or ourselves) becomes extremely narrow. *With regard to our expectations of ourselves, the expectation or the demand of perfectionism causes us to feel that we have failed in life; it blinds us to the unique person we are and the special gifts we have to share with the world.*

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 or in our friendships. Some of these expectations may be realistic, but many are probably not. We may have expectations of our children or even our parents. We may have expectations of fellow parishioners within our church. Some of these expectations may be realistic, but many are probably not. Remember, it is not so much our expectations but *our attachment to our expectations* that causes suffering for ourselves and those we love. We need to become conscious of our attachment to our expectations, our tight-fisted grasping of them, and then, as the Zen Master Charlotte Joko Beck has suggested, see through them, see how narcissistic they are, and gently let them go.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is a celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people who follow Jesus hail him as "the son of David," "the King of Israel," the Messiah for whom they longed. Matthew 21:10 tells us,

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

This question, the question "Who is this?" speaks to the heart of our faith as Christians! The answer to this question shapes our expectations of Jesus, just as it did for the people of Jerusalem. It puts us squarely in the position of the disciples who were asked this very question by Jesus. Matthew 16:13-15 tells us,

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?" As we continue to move through Lent, let us to reflect on this question and the events of Holy Week in light of the expectations that the people placed upon Jesus. As we examine how their answer to the question "Who is this?" shaped their expectations and blinded them to what was before their eyes, I would like us to see how our expectations can not only obscure our vision; they can lead us to miss the glorious reality of what is revealed in the mysterious presence of our Lord.

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 like

King David. They hoped that Jesus would lead the uprising against the Roman Empire, which had oppressed and enslaved their people.

We can't blame the Jews for seeing Jesus through the lens of their own history. But what if their expectation blinded them to his reality? 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 Romans but to show us how to dwell in the kingdom of God?

On Palm Sunday, the crowd welcomed Jesus with open arms. As the week unfolded, the more they got to know him, 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 scribes and 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 money lenders.

When Jesus failed to meet their expectations, the crowd not only threw him away; they crucified him. Expectations disappointed don't generally 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 loving or not. Let us examine our expectations of others to see whether they narrow our line of vision to such an extent that we miss the God-given uniqueness of the other.

As we enter into Holy Week, let us examine our expectations of life, how attached we are to these expectations, and how we react when life disappoints us. Let us reexamine our expectations of Jesus that we might be open to the mystery of his presence. If we can give up our unrealistic or 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 power of the Resurrection!

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.