

Great Expectations Sunday, September 15, 2019

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

**DO NOT CATAPULT THE CARROTS!
DO NOT JUGGLE GOBS OF FAT!
DO NOT DROP THE MASHED POTATOES
ON THE GERBIL OR THE CAT!**

– *The New Kid on the Block*, Jack Prelutsky, 1984

–

Chalice Lighting and Opening Words words of Gretchen Haley

Whatever you have come in anticipating, whatever you expect or worry for our world, for the future, for our lives – let it go.

Make space in your heart to be surprised. Make room in your soul for a new story to take shape. Let astonishment be possible at this life that remains a miracle.

Imagine here the bursting of joy, relentless and resilient, coming in waves, washing over us, with music, and story, and silence, and still this dreaming together, being hope for each other and courage to believe in this new day dawning for all of us.

Come, let us worship together.

READING

Recognition, by Daran Larson

*It is so difficult to see this **flower**
because the countless others
we've seen before
cloud the view,
along with how we expect it to look
and how it might be improved.*

*Even the faces of the ones we love deeply
hide like buried treasure
behind histories of expression.*

*In order to see
what is right in front of our eyes,
we first have to recognize
we have gradually
become blind,
and then begin
the slow work of forgetting.*

Sermon

Great Expectations (c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

A man was stranded all alone on a deserted island for years. Finally one day a boat sailed into view. The man frantically waved, gaining the skipper's attention. The boat came near the island, and a sailor disembarked and greeted the stranded man. Noticing the man had build three huts on the island, the sailor asked

“What are those three huts you have here?”

“Well, that’s my house there.”

“What’s that next hut?” asked the sailor.

“That hut is my church.”

“What about that third hut?”

“Oh” explained the man, “that’s where I used to go to church.”

This month the theme for our Sunday School kids is “Expectations.” What a perfect theme for September. The church year is new, the rugs have been washed and the cabinets sorted out, and everything seems bright and shiny again. Plans are afoot. Energy is high.

Whether people are church shopping, as they often do in September, or returning from their summer sojourns, people seem happy to be here. Not that people are unhappy or lethargic the rest of the year – no, it's just that in September everything picks up and a new anticipation of things to come fills the air.

There is nothing like the new church year to stir people's expectations. And, oh my, people often have high expectations of churches, don't they? *Conflicting*, high expectations. People expect their church to be a place of challenge – but also of comfort. People want their church to be a voice of justice, but also a retreat from our bruised and weary world. People want a place where they can bring their imperfect selves and be loved anyway, but then people can be disappointed to discover their church isn't perfect, for it is comprised of imperfect people like themselves.

Now, I know none of the things I am saying applies to any of us here today. Our expectations are realistic, of course! We accept imperfection, of course! We can balance

any conflicting desires and expectations, of course!

But there are churches out there where relationships crumble, disaffection sets in, and conflicts arise, often because someone's expectations are not met. Any religious institution created by human beings is subject to all the foibles and failures of human character. Any human institution, religious or not, carries the challenge of expectation in the face of imperfection. Expectations, and most particularly unspoken expectations, can be minefields, even premeditated resentments. People' expectations of their churches and their pastors can be extremely high; those same expectations represent the fertile soil for epic failure.

Consider this old saw about the perfect pastor, for instance, which has been floating around countless church newsletters for decades and, more recently, the internet. For me, there is great irony in reading this; you'll see why pretty quickly.

The Perfect Pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes. (Okay, that isn't even the ironic part, yet.) He condemns sin roundly, but never hurts anyone's feelings. He works from 8 a.m. until midnight, and is also the church janitor.

The Perfect Pastor makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church.

He is 29 years old and has 40 years' worth of experience.

Above all, he is handsome.

The Perfect Pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and he spends most of his time with the senior citizens.

He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps

him seriously dedicated to his church.

He makes 15 home visits a day and is always in his office to be handy when needed.

The Perfect Pastor always has time for church meetings and all of its committees, never missing the meeting of any church organization. And he is always busy evangelizing the unchurched.

The Perfect Pastor is always in the next town over!

If your pastor does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are tired of their pastor, too. Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the top of your list. If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1, 643 pastors. One of them should be perfect.

Have faith in this letter. One church broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months.

From my perspective, it's perfectly understandable that human beings develop expectations. From the earliest ages, we notice patterns. Little babies are given toys to teach them to sort by color, shape, and number. Noticing patterns is a way of organizing our world, a way of making sense of things. From those patterns, we make assumptions. And those assumptions help to set our expectations of how the world is meant to work.

If the only pastors one has ever known have been men, then, of course, one might assume any pastor would be a man. Once one has made the assumption, it's a quick jump to expecting a pastor to be a man. So, imagine one's surprise when some of those 1, 643 pastors are actually women!

There is a psychological test used to determine decline in neurological functioning. It is

a game where cards with various colors, shapes, and numbers are laid out four at a time, The patient is asked to group them. No rules are given, and the rules keep changing as the game goes on. So the patient figures out the first pattern for grouping the cards, only to be caught up short when suddenly they are told that pattern is wrong.

For example, the patient may start sorting the cards by color. All goes well until suddenly the patient is told they have sorted the last card incorrectly. Oops, unbeknownst to the patient, the cards now need to be sorted by number. And, who knew? The patient has to muddle through the confusion of those unspoken expectations.

That card game is a perfect metaphor for life in some ways. When we suddenly discover our old way of looking at things no longer works we have to recover from our mistaken assumptions and their related expectations; we have to regroup, rethink our patterns, make sense of our world again.

Recognition, by Daran Larson

*It is so difficult to see this **bell**
because the countless others
we've seen before
cloud the view,
along with how we expect it to look
and how it might be improved.*

*Even the faces of the ones we love deeply
hide like buried treasure
behind histories of expression.*

*In order to see
what is right in front of our eyes,*

*we first have to recognize
we have gradually
become blind,
and then begin
the slow work of forgetting.*

Expectations are not necessarily bad. They do help us organize our world. They help us understand the rules we have to follow. If we are told ahead of time that we will have 20 minutes to complete the test and that we will have to lay our pencils down when told to do so, we know what to do. If we are told we have to arise in time to eat a healthy breakfast before catching the school bus, we know what to do. If we are told we have to sit quietly when someone else is talking, we know how to behave.

Expectations can also help us strive to improve. They can teach us to aim high. A sports coach who expects her team to attend practices and to spend a certain amount of time doing related exercise helps her athletes to strengthen their bodies and to work together as a team.

But problems occur when expectations are unrealistic, impossible to achieve. Someone who processes language slowly might need more than 20 minutes to complete the test. Someone who has to work a night job to save money for college might not be able to rise early enough to eat breakfast. Someone with certain psychological and/or neurological issues might not be able to sit quietly. Someone who has a part-time job after school might not be able to attend all the practices for the sports team.

Being unable to live up to expectations – even unreasonable ones – can be a recipe for plummeting self-worth and self-esteem. Problems also occur when we are not conscious of our expectations and also when we fail to communicate what they are. But here's the thing: Bumping up against unspoken, unconscious, unreasonable expectations can also give us opportunities for changing and growing.

Thirty years ago, my husband and I rented a cabin on a remote lake up near Jackman. (I tell this story with his permission.) It was the kind of place where you had to bring all your food for the entire week. You couldn't even drive in without a 4wd vehicle. In our case, we always parked our car a couple of miles out, and the camp's owner transported us the rest of the way in in his vehicle.

So grocery shopping was an exact science. My family had been going there since I was 6 years old, so we believed we knew the drill. We always shopped in Skowhegan to minimize the distance we would have to transport perishable food. But that particular summer, we had a new baby. Maybe we weren't thinking straight as a result, but we managed to get all the way from Bolton, Massachusetts, to Skowhegan, Maine, before we realized that neither of us had brought any cash.

Seriously? How could that be?

This was back in the days before your bank card worked everywhere. Our bank card worked only at our local bank.

It was also before grocery stores took credit cards. I know, because we went to the Skowhegan Hannaford and asked. No credit cards allowed.

We had a reservation at the local motel. We settled in for the night, thinking the only thing we could do was to throw ourselves at the mercy of the motel proprietor. The next morning, we sheepishly told him our story when we went to check out. Would it be possible to pay extra with either credit card or check and have him give us cash for the difference? He preferred the check, because he wouldn't have a fee, but he did have a question for us:

“Are you local?” he asked.

“Oh, oh,” we thought. “This will be the kiss of death.”

But we are honest people. Also our address was right at the top of the check. So we answered, “No, we are from Massachusetts.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, perking up considerably. “No problem then!”

That wasn't what we expected! In our part of the world, checks from away were the ones that were suspect. So we learned: Not everyone is presented with the same evidence. And not everyone organizes the world the way we do.

One mystery remained, however. After we purchased our groceries and headed north, we tried to figure out how we could have been so careless as to go on vacation without any cash. Here's what we discovered: In my family, my dad handled all the money. The only cash my mother ever carried in her wallet was cash that he brought her from the bank. In my mind's eye, I can still see him doling out the dough. But, in Steve's family, his mother handled all the money. Each of us made assumptions based on our life experiences, and we set our expectations accordingly.

That experience from our early marriage gave us a funny story to tell. But it gave us much, much more. Drilling down to find the cause of our error helped us to see we both carried assumptions and had expectations we were not even aware of. We realized we would bump up against them, and we could use those incidents to grow together. Because of that realization, our marriage grew stronger. So, I lift that up as a telling story.

Maybe our congregational life together will give us similar opportunities to learn and grow, to expand our understanding of others and ourselves. When we run smack into each other's expectations that seem unfair or unreasonable or even simply silly,

may we turn around and face them. May we learn and grow together. May we uncloud our view.

Recognition, by Daran Larson

*It is so difficult to see this **congregation**
because the countless others
we've seen before
cloud the view,
along with how we expect them to look
and how they might be improved.*

*Even the faces of the ones we love deeply
hide like buried treasure
behind histories of expression.*

*In order to see
what is right in front of our eyes,
we first have to recognize
we have gradually
become blind,
and then begin
the slow work of forgetting.*

Benediction Words of Marjorie Newlin Leaming

Remembering the universe is so much larger than our ability to comprehend, let us go forth from this time together with the resolve to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our own petty expectations, so that wonder – that sense of what is sacred – can find space to open up our minds and illumine our lives.

