

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:1-13, NRSV)

Things don't always go as expected. This point was brought home to me this past Thursday afternoon. Colleen, Matthew, and I were heading out to Shelter Island for what we hoped would be a relaxing Fourth of July weekend. It all started the day before when I made a last minute decision to buy a bike rack for our van. Matthew and I went to Hitch King in Queens (I hope you like my royal references) to have a trailer hitch receiver installed on our van so that we could attach the rack. We made the appointment at 3 p.m. and the man on the phone assured me the installation would take 15 minutes, 20 minutes tops, which was crucial because I had to be at the bike shop in Port Washington before 6 p.m. Two and a half hours after arriving we finally had our hitch receiver attached. And I have to say they were right, it only took 20 minutes to bolt the hitch receiver to the van, after waiting for over 2 hours for the process to begin. The good news is that we showed up at the bike shop at 5:55 and got our bike rack.

The adventure continued on Thursday afternoon. The van is packed and the bikes are securely fastened to the new rack. I started the van and a light came on my dashboard. I had never seen this light before. I stare at this light as Matthew yells out, "Go dad go! Why isn't the van going anywhere?" Colleen digs out the owner's manual and we discover that it is the master light indicator. Hummmm. The car is running and the lights are working so we decide to ignore it. We get as far as the corner of Copley and Northern Blvd., right next to the church parking lot when I notice smoke coming from the back of our van. I ponder what to do. We pull into the Americana parking lot. Matthew chimes in, "Is this the way to Shelter Island?" I snoop around under the car and

see nothing suspicious except a long piece of plastic wrapped around the axel. I get back in the car and start driving toward Searingtown Rd., reporting to Colleen that I've figured it out: the problem is a long piece of plastic wrapped around the axel near the tire. I assure her that, in my expert opinion, the turning tire is burning and melting away the plastic, thus the smoke and we should continue on to Shelter Island. Colleen replies, "You think something *on our car* is burning and melting?" "Oh," I say, "when you put it that way maybe we should get a mechanic to look at it." We pull into the Citgo Station on Port Washington Boulevard when Matthew asks the question I've been asking myself, "When are we going to get to Shelter Island?" I know the mechanics there, and they got a good laugh out of my theory. They tell me that the light on the dashboard means I have a taillight out and the smoke is just condensation coming out of the exhaust on a very humid and rainy day. After replacing the taillight, the mechanic unwraps the piece of plastic from my axel just to be nice. Back in the van, I announce to my wilting family that most of my childhood trips started out with some type of mechanical problem and after that the trips were smooth sailing. Colleen commented that the smooth sailing following mechanical problems had never been her family's experience.

But we did have smooth sailing even as we rode on the ferry to Shelter Island to stay in Sally Calvin's house. We find the house no problem and I'm feeling quite proud of how flawlessly the trip has gone since our quality time with the mechanic. My pride starts to sag as I am unable to find the hidden house key. Colleen and Matthew struck out as well. We call Sally's parents on Shelter Island, whose number is temporarily out of service. Finally I call Sally on her cell phone in Bermuda who gives me other clues to finding the mystery key. It's not to be found. Eventually I found an open window and, with the help of some tools, removed the screen with minimal damage. As I'm hoisting myself through the open window Colleen asks, "Are you sure this is Sally's house? I know she wouldn't have left a window open." Full of second-guessing, my feet land on the floor as I imagine the headline, Minister Shot by Homeowners While Breaking and Entering. Once in the kitchen I see a note from Sally and am greatly relieved. I let my weary family in from the rain thinking all we need now is a key. Sally calls from Bermuda and thinks I'm joking about breaking into the house. I put Colleen on the phone who assures her that I'm not. As we ponder the mystery of the missing key, a blue Toyota pulls up in the driveway. I ask Sally, "Is someone else staying here who drives a blue Toyota?" It doesn't ring a bell with Sally. Fortunately it is Sally's new housekeeper who, as you've guessed by now, has the mystery key and our *relaxing* weekend finally begins. Our great expectations collided with the unexpected and something unexpected happened. Later a friend asked me jokingly if it was appropriate for a minister to be breaking into someone's house. I assured her that it was thoroughly biblical because the scriptures tell us that Jesus will come like a thief in the night! I was merely emulating the life of Christ.

Today's scripture lesson from Mark chapter 6 is all about great expectations and what happens when they collide with the unexpected. In the previous chapter Jesus and his disciples successfully ministered to gentiles on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus healed a woman with a chronic condition and raised a young girl from the dead. The disciples likely expected very little to come out of this time among the gentiles and

yet witnessed Jesus perform mighty miracles. As they left and headed back to familiar territory, specifically Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, they brimmed with great expectations. And yet things did not turn out as expected in Jesus' own back yard.

It all started on the Sabbath in the synagogue where Jesus taught with great insight and authority. It didn't take long before he offended the home crowd who could only see him as Mary and Joseph's son—the good kid who used to be a carpenter before going off on this religious kick. The crowd expected Jesus to be the young man they once knew but now he had become this big shot rabbi. Their expectations collided with the unexpected and anger erupted. As the congregation's disdain became vocal Jesus responded, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown." The text reports that Jesus couldn't work any major miracles in Nazareth, except for healing a few sick people, nothing as major as the miracles that had come so easily over in that unfamiliar land on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. Verse 6 reports that the crowd's unbelief, their lack of faith, astounded Jesus. Apparently Jesus had great expectations, hopes, and dreams for how his ministry would be received in his hometown. When Jesus was unexpectedly rejected, it affected his ministry and rendered him almost powerless.

Jesus did not live up to the crowd's expectations, nor did the crowd live up to his. The powerful message here is that our expectations greatly color our perception of reality. There's an old saying that goes, "Prepare for the worst and hope for the best." The wisdom here is that if we have low expectations we won't be disappointed. But who wants to go through life with low expectations? Is not the life of faith about great expectations of how life can be in this world and the next? The crowd expected Jesus to be that nice boy from down the street who came to their synagogue to offer some religious pleasantries. When they discovered that he had changed, they responded with anger. This happens to us too. When people fail to live up to our expectations we sometimes get angry. Sometimes this is appropriate, when someone fails to follow through on a commitment or behaves in a hurtful way we did not expect. On the other hand, sometimes our expectations are unrealistic. Perhaps the person in question has changed and we simply need to be more flexible, allowing our expectations to change as well.

Jesus found the situation in Nazareth difficult because he could not live up to their expectations. I can sympathize with this because I'm a pleaser. It's always difficult for me when I can't live up to someone's expectations, even if they're unrealistic. With age I've improved in this department, but it's not easy. When people place certain expectations, hopes, or dreams on us one of two things can happen—we can become encouraged or discouraged. If the expectations are realistic, they can help us stay the course and fulfill our dreams. However, if the expectations are unrealistic, they can quickly become a discouraging burden.

Expectations play an important role in family life. When I'm counseling a couple engaged to be married, I offer them the option of taking an extensive inventory that covers 12 areas of a relationship, everything from finances to in-laws. I always explain that the questions in the inventory are not about what's right or wrong in a marriage. The

main purpose of the survey is to measure their marital expectations and assess where the couple agrees and disagrees. If both people expect to spend every weekend with the bride's parents there's no problem. But if one wants to do that, while the other expects to take day trips together, then the couple has an issue to work out.

The same is true in the business world and in the life of the church. If an employee is expected to work 40 hours a week and he only works 30, there's a problem. If an employee only thought she was expected to work 40 hours a week and the boss expects 50 there's a problem.

We also deal with self-expectations. If we expect too little of ourselves then we're not challenged to achieve and may feel disgusted that we've not accomplished more. If we expect too much from ourselves then we constantly feel disappointed that we're not living up to that standard. Those of us with low self-esteem expect too little of ourselves. Those of us who are perfectionists expect too much. The question that matters the most is what does God expect? We get some clues in the next few verses.

First, Jesus left Nazareth and continued teaching from village to village. God does not expect us to stay in a place like Nazareth where we are being mistreated and unable to work. It's God's desire that our lives flourish, and pruning away the unhealthy branches is a must. Second, Jesus sent his disciples on a missionary journey and told them to take very little, but instead to rely on the kindness of others. Is Jesus telling us to give no thought to the future and become beggars? Of course not. But he is encouraging us to be like the disciples and live by faith that God will ultimately give us what we need in this life and the next. Third, when Jesus sent the disciples out he expected that they would meet up with resistance. When this happened, he instructed them to literally shake the dust off their feet and move on. We will fare no better than the disciples did. Sometimes we're accepted and at other times rejected. Sometimes life works out as we expected and at other times it doesn't even come close. The advice here is to move on in the faith that whether today exceeded or fell short of our expectations, that tomorrow is another day full of new opportunities. Finally, the disciples did as Jesus told them and had great success in their ministry. We too are called to follow God's way in our everyday lives. It's not enough to know what to do; we are called to live it. The Apostle Paul called this putting on Christ.

God does have expectations of us. Expectations that we will love and forgive, listen and learn, help and heal a broken world. These are great, truly great and wonderful expectations. Expectations that will lead to our own peace and fulfillment. Some days we do better than others. Sometimes the evening calls for us to shake off the dust of that day, and look forward to the promise of tomorrow. And the promise is this, that God is ever present in our lives, helping us fulfill great expectations. AMEN.

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July 6, 2003

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PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace and God of glory, we know that you have high expectations of us and that too often we miss the mark. Forgive us we pray. Lead us in your path of love and forgiveness, mercy and kindness. Open our eyes to the times when we unfairly lay unrealistic expectations on others. Help us treat our sisters and brothers with the same grace you offer us. When people burden us with unrealistic expectations, give us courage to speak up for ourselves. Some of us have low self-esteem and need your help to strive for more out of life. Some of us are perfectionists and need to treat ourselves more kindly. Deal with us where we are and move us on to where you want us to be through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.