

16 Pentecost - 20 September 2009 - Proper 20 B
Proverbs 31:10-31; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37
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There was a Bible study at my former Parish that I used to teach on Tuesday afternoons. It was all women, mostly over sixty. I walked in one day into an absolute hornets nest. The topic they were discussing was our reading from Proverbs this morning. They were wondering how it was possible for any wife to fulfill all the roles that this woman was doing. There is just something funny about hearing these sweet, wonderful, wise, Spirit filled people saying that if their husbands expected all that from them they would have, "kicked him to the curb." I gracefully or maybe not so gracefully backed out of the conversation by saying I was not married and didn't know and turned the class's attention to our Bible study.

The question had left me until I saw this reading. The truth is, I still don't have an answer. What helps me is reading the passage in light of the other readings from today's lectionary. It seems to me that these readings all contain an element of expectations. In the first reading, the one from Proverbs that disturbs some wives of long experience and great wisdom. This is what the people expected from the so called "capable" wife. Then we see in James' letter and in the Gospel reading many other expectations, many of them, if not all of them, unfulfilled.

Here in lies the question; Who's fault is it when people's expectations aren't met by other people, or by God? Who's fault is it that the world is in the shape it is in? When churches are vandalized and people are hungry, homeless, and hurting. Why is there so much envy and hatred, as James writes in his letter to the early Church?

James says that people's prayers are not being answered in the way they want either because they are not praying at all, or because they are praying for the wrong things. James sums it up by saying that people should, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."

Here we are worshipping this God this morning. We are here because of God's love for us and our love for God. God wants what is best for us because we are His children. We have drawn near to God. And we experience God drawing near to us; or at the very least, we seek to experience it. That is our expectation, and the expectation of everyone else who, like us, are worshipping in churches this morning.

People have expectations of God, and of their relationship with God. It is a fact of the Christian life that brings us to the Gospel reading for this morning. Jesus is walking down the road apart from his disciples but He knows what they are talking about. Who is the greatest among them? Jesus has the authority to yell at them, rebuke them, and tell them to be quiet. Instead He sits down. He does not raise His voice at them, He simply teaches. And he expects the twelve to listen. And because they try to do so, they are afraid.

Then Jesus takes a child and places him or her in their midst. In the days of Jesus and his disciples being a child was the lowest of the low. But Jesus tells his disciples that he expects them to welcome them. And he says, "I expect you to know that when you welcome the lowest of low, that you are welcoming me. And I expect you to know that when you welcome me, you are welcoming God the Father.

So, in light of this passage, the question occurs to me: "Are we Christians expecting too much? Or are we expecting the wrong things? Or are we expecting the wrong things of other people? Are we expecting the wrong things from God?"

I have heard it said that God answers every prayer, sometimes the answer is, No. Maybe you've heard that, too. I have also heard that we can not do anything to make God love us more or less. I hope you've heard that, too; because I think this is a powerful idea; Jesus doesn't get angry at his disciples when they get it wrong, when their expectations miss the mark; when they fail to meet the expectations that he has for them.

People all get it wrong sometimes, but God asks them to get up and keep trying. It is up to people to understand what their mission is in life, where their spiritual gifts are and then to use them to the Glory of God the Father. It is what is expected of people. They pray, read the scriptures, and discern to find out what God wants. And when they get it wrong, as inevitably they do, it is different for each of them.

Abraham Heschel was a Rabbi who survived the atrocities of the Nazi regime in Germany of the 1930's and 40's, and worked here in the United States for civil rights. In his book, *I Asked for Wonder*, Heschel wrote: "Over and above

our personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, and oppression... there is a calling, a demanding, a waiting, an expectation. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?

Over and above all things is a sublime expectation, a waiting for... This is the most important experience in the life of every human being: something is asked of me. Every human being has had a moment in which they sensed a mysterious waiting for them. Meaning is found in responding to the demand, meaning is found in sensing the demand."

What does all this mean? What does it mean about God's expectations of people? What is expected of me? What is expected of us? The message of the Gospel suggests an answer. What God expects of us and what God invites is found in surrender and obedience. It's called letting go and letting God. It means that God invites us to give up control and expects us to be about God's business. It means that from God's perspective, Our task here on earth is to find out what God wants from us; to find out what God expects from us.

God puts us here on earth, so that He can be here on earth through the Holy Spirit. We are God's hands, His feet, and most importantly, His heart. He expects us to act like it, to love his creation and his creatures. God expects us to love one another. And God expects us to turn to God to find Him helping us to meet His expectations, while we let go our own.

The old saying, "What would Jesus do?" springs to my mind. When I reflect on the Gospel reading of today, I think we can see that Jesus expects the disciples to understand this business about Him dying and after three days being raised from death. Not only is he going to die, but he is going to be murdered. It's all completely contrary to what they expect. But Jesus' expectations of himself help him know that he can bring them along.

You and I hear this part of the story, but we have also read the ending. We have an advantage that they do not. We understand a bit better than they do.

But when we try to imagine being in their shoes, we can appreciate their difficulty. This is the master teacher whom they love and for whom they gave up their regular lives and jobs to wander around and listen to., And here is Jesus telling

them he is going to die, horribly, as a criminal; and not only that but that he will rise again. When we come to the scripture with fresh eyes, we see that this statement is quite unsettling.

I am new here, and from my perspective, the expectations that I have, they you have, that Fr. Jim has, that the seminary and the diocese have, are all still a bit confusing. Maybe you, like me, are still confused about some things in your life, in your relationship with God.

People in the world around us have their own confusion about their own expectations, as well. Sometimes this confusion is due to work, money, spiritually, family, or in a relationship. The list goes on and they can fill in their own blanks like you and I fill in ours.

The good news is that with Christ in their lives leading them, with them following as best they're able, they, like us, are never actually wandering lost in generalities, permanently pursuing false expectations, forever regretting failures to meet expectations that God never called them to meet. Instead, whenever we help them to know better God's own call and God's own power, they know better that they, like we, are children of God. And just as the disciples, they like we may not always understand what God wants, but we all can know by His Spirit that He is always with us, just God tells us we can expect of Him

Now we end up back at the original question. Whose fault is it when our expectations are not met? The follow up is question is; How can we change that? How can we help Jesus be present to His people in this world? A priest friend of mine once told me, if one wants to change the world for the better, one better start with the person that is looking back out from the mirror. We are here to be about heavenly things and to bring the Kingdom of God to those who do not know Him with the help of Jesus Christ.

Therefore we pray, Grant us, O Lord, not to be anxious about Earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, Amen.

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