

“High expectations”

August 28, 2011

Text: Matthew 16:21-28, Romans 12:9-21

I.

We're a people of expectations, aren't we? I mean, think about your life! We have expectations.

When we go into a new job, we have certain expectations—of how we will perform, of our relationships with other employees, of how self-fulfilling our job will be. When we embark on a new exercise program, we have some very specific expectations with regard to weight and how we feel physically. When we vote for a particular candidate, we have expectations of what legislation and causes they will support.

At the start of the football season, we have a certain expectation of how our team will do. Will they be competitive? Will it be a tough season for the sports fan? We have expectations. Certainly—every year—as we send our kids off to school, we have a range of expectations.

I hope we all—personally—harbor high expectations in life? I think God wants us to be people of high expectations. I don't think God wants us to just tiptoe through life—never changing, doing the same thing day after day, never taking any risks and never really *going for it*.

God wants us to expect something from life, to look towards the heavens as we approach the new day and, above all, to stay positive.

A substitute Sunday School teacher couldn't open the combination lock on the supply cabinet one Sunday at church, so she sought out the pastor for help. As he began to try and open the combination lock, the pastor looked up, as to heaven, moved his lips silently, then turned the dial to the first number. Then, repeating this routine for the next two numbers, he opened the lock.

The teacher gasped, *I'm in awe of your faith, pastor*.

Really, he quipped, *No big deal; the number is on a piece of tape on the ceiling*. Looking up ... staying positive, having a sense of expectation about the day and the week ahead can make all the difference.

II.

Expectations have to do with standards. Do we have standards—certain standards of expectation for ourselves, for our kids and grandkids ... for others? Of course, our

expectations need to be *healthy* expectations where *healthy* means a level of expectation that is equal to the person's innate gifts and talents. In other words, if we have talent and God-given gifts, then *use them*.

With our children and youth back in school once again, we think about expectations, don't we? We want our children to succeed and do well; at the same time, we don't want to, unfairly, put too much stress on them. Sometimes, it's a difficult balance to work out.

How hard do we push? When is it in our child's best interest that we keep nudging them forward? And when do we need to back off and give them more space?

In a **Calvin and Hobbes** comic strip of some time back, Calvin is talking to Susie (his arch enemy) about a test they had just taken.

What grade did you get, Susie, Calvin asks? Her quick response is, I got an "A."

Really, Calvin replies, boy, I'd hate to be you. I got a "C."

Curious about his dismissive response, Susie asks, *Why on earth would you rather get a "C" than an "A?"*

To which Calvin sort of smugly retorts, *My life is a lot easier when everyone's expectations of me are lower.*

Although we never want to pressure on our children unfairly or inappropriately, still a sense of *high expectations* can help guide and influence our motivations.

It can help us to do things we might otherwise never grow to do. It can lift our self-esteem and build our vision and confidence as we embrace tomorrow.

Our world needs excellence in all areas. Indeed, the pursuit of excellence makes all of us better. And how can any of us ever know to what levels of excellence we can ascend if we don't aim for the "A" in class and not the "C?"

There is always the sense in our lives that we don't know who we are until we go for it in life and aim high in all that we do. A healthy set of expectations about our future positively affects the way we do everything. Moreover, it feels good to be utilizing our God-given gifts and to be excelling in the process.

III.

In our reading from **Matthew** this morning—which is a *testy* and *challenging* reading—Jesus starts to talk to the disciples about how he's going to have to *go to Jerusalem ...* and how he's going to *suffer greatly* and *be killed*.

The disciples, of course—most visibly, **Peter**—get upset ... all of which leads to a scolding of Peter and to some tough teachings on *ultimate meanings*. Clearly, in terms of life-commitments from his followers, Jesus has notably *high expectations*. Anyone wanting to be his disciple is going to have some tough decisions to make.

Jesus doesn't mince words. He simply tells his disciples—straight away:

1. *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*
2. *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

It's not easy to be a Christian. Expectations are high. Christians are called to *give up* stuff, to make sacrifices and to prioritize of their life-goals.

The **Apostle Paul**, too, was a *high expectations* believer. He had a huge vision for the spread of the Christian gospel and dedicated his life to the realization of that vision. For him, becoming a Christian was not a low expectations alternative. It wasn't simply a matter of *raising your hand for Jesus*.

- Becoming a Christian meant a profound change in one's life.
- It meant a particular commitment to a particular way of life.

Like Jesus, Paul has expectations of Christians. He expects them to conform to a certain standard of human conduct. It has to do with LOVE—not just any love, but a BIG LOVE ... a love that shows a BIG spirit and a compassionate and caring heart.

Our Christian faith asks something of us. It has *high expectations*—about LOVE and what LOVE can do in the human heart; how LOVE can transform the human spirit and, most importantly, where LOVE can take us in our personal relationships; how it can break down barriers that divide us and bridge the chasms of division and estrangement that separate us.

IV.

Check out **Paul** in **Romans 12**. These are the expectations Paul has for Christians in the churches he's helped start up and to guide through their early years of faith development.

Let love be genuine, he says. *Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ...*

- *love one another with a mutual affection ... rejoice in hope;*
- *be patient in suffering ... show hospitality to strangers.*
- *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (tough teaching) ...*
- *don't be arrogant and rude; associate with all people ...*
- *do NOT repay anyone evil for evil ... don't avenge yourself ...*

In all things, overcome evil with good ...

Wow, sounds like Jesus' **Sermon on the Mount** to me. Which of course is *the best of Jesus*, where—in **Matthew 5-7** Jesus talks about *loving our enemies ... and turning the other cheek ... and not worrying too much about our worldly possessions ... and not judging one another.*

It's where Jesus gives us **the Lord's Prayer** with its emphasis on forgiveness and on an openness to God's will ... ***on earth as it is in heaven.***

V.

Our Christian faith, friends, is a faith of *high expectations*. And it makes all the difference. When we grow to the *high expectations* to which our faith calls us, Barriers are broken, opposites are drawn together, unity is established and a larger sense of *new community* is realized.

When we seek to *live out* the *high expectations* to which our faith aspires, differences are reconciled, diseases are cured, addictions are broken and—everywhere—new hope rises up in the human spirit.

It's understandable how we get discouraged with life. Life is difficult and hard. And sometimes, no matter how hard we *work* ... and how hard we *pray* ... no matter how *good* we try to be, the answers we look for and the new day we hope for, don't come.

And we cry out, *how long, Lord, how long?* And there are no easy answers to our cry. But still, we keep after it. Why? Because we believe ... and we hope.

Because the power of God can—indeed—invade the body, inflate the mind, swell the soul, lift the Spirit and make us more than we ever imagined. That's what God does; that's what LOVE does.

Friends, let us NEVER give up the *high expectations* we hold for ourselves ... for our children and our families ... for our communities, our nation and our world. Let us aim high; and let us expect great things and give ourselves to the process of attaining them.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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