

Disrupted Expectations

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
October 14, 2018
Mark 10:17-31

Since parenting, like life, does not come with a handbook, one of our favorite books EVER remains “What to Expect When You’re Expecting.” It impacted my domestic partner more directly, but to have a resource like that was so helpful. We simply needed assurance, as we do now when our children are young adults, that things are OK, or not.

Expectations are funny things. Three things can happen – they are not met, they are met, they are exceeded. Perhaps you’ve been to a movie about which you’ve read rave reviews. And you walk out saying: “I don’t get what the fuss was all about.” Or, conversely, you go to a restaurant on the spur of the moment and leave sated and pleased, your expectations having been far exceeded.

Expectations are funny things. The Chicago Cubs did not win a World Series for more than 100 years. People expected that streak to continue, year after year, decade after decade, so much so that they even took on the persona of “lovable losers.” Then they won, two years ago, defying all expectations. Now, having done that, when they lose their fans become even more annoying and insufferable than when they were lovable losers.

Or Rochester, and snow. We expect a bazillion inches, proudly, so that when it doesn't happen on time, or at all, we don’t know quite what to do with ourselves, needing to find another topic to complain about, like the warm winter weather.

Expectations are funny things. They can also be serious things. Perhaps you followed the trial of Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke, accused of murdering a 15 year-old young man named Laquan McDonald in 2012. People were preparing for what has typically been the case, the acquittal of a white officer. Churches were praying and protesting and my seminary and others were

preparing for whatever community response would follow the verdict's announcement. The announcement itself, "guilty." Expectations, again, defied, as Chicago now addresses a new reality, relief, and the real possibility of reform.

Expectations are funny things, and serious things, and important things. A young man approaches Jesus with a question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminds him of the tenets of the Ten Commandments. "I've done all of these, since I was a boy." What you think he will say next is understood if not articulated. "So we're good, right?" I've done all the things. I've checked all the boxes. Whatever that young man understands eternal life to be, and it's not exactly clear what he DOES mean by that, is now guaranteed.

Jesus clearly appreciates his earnestness, his devotion. But Jesus is also melancholy about the whole thing. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" And we are told: "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Expectations are funny things. This young man's were turned upside down and inside out. He was rich, so when Jesus told him that his goal was attainable only if he divested of his wealth, he was shocked, we are told, and grieving, because he know what a big lift Jesus had put before him.

Later, in debriefing this experience with his disciples, Jesus utters some pretty iconic words – "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God, he told his followers, relocating the young man's questions about inheriting eternal life to one about God's kingdom. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Presbyterian Outlook editor Jill Duffield writes that the young man is "unable to relinquish the image he has of himself for the sake of the one that reflects his creator." She continues: "Jesus is looking the rich man straight in the eye and still he cannot hear and heed the word of the Lord."

“The rich man,’ she writes, “is shocked and grieved. I can understand his response. All his life, his money has equaled access, favor and special consideration. No doubt, he expected Jesus to affirm his piety and obedience to the commandments, give him a pat on the back and send him on his way. The rich man perhaps thinks: I work hard. I got into a top-notch university. I volunteer with my church. So, the rich man kneels before Jesus looking for yet one more seal of approval, one more accolade to add to the long list on his resume. But Jesus, loving him, asks that he stop acquiring - wealth, status, affirmation - and start relinquishing - power, money, privilege - in order to follow the One who doesn't puff himself up, but pours himself out. This is not what a person who already knows the right answers, who already assumes he is living the right way, wants to hear. No wonder he is shocked and grieved and leaves.”

This story, like stewardship, is about money. And it is about more than money. “Money,” the “M” word, like the “P” word, “politics, and the “S” word, “sex,” topics we don’t discuss in polite company, or churches. And yet all three are topics that rise up regularly in the Bible, so we do well when we talk about them.

We do several things with this story. We Teflon-ize it. Oh, I’m not rich, we say, so that can’t possibly pertain to me. Or we symbolize it. Jesus can’t possibly mean to give away *everything*. Or we particularize it. This story is about THAT young man, and him alone. Jesus would have a different demand for me if I were to ask him the same questions.

Well yes...and. Money matters, to Jesus, to us. How we earn it. How we spend it. How we give it away. It matters.

Author Meghan O’Gieblyn writes of the church and a “missed opportunity to offer an alternative to (our) culture of consumerism, of capitalism.” The church does not provide an alternative, she says, an escape from consumerism. Rather, it “(marries) the culture.”

If you go up and down the channels at any moment, you will discover church services – white and black – purporting something called the “prosperity gospel.” I don’t think it’s the gospel at all. It encourages people to give in order that they might become wealthy, equating financial wealth with God’s favor, God’s blessing. And it equates, further, the financial success of any church’s pastor, a private jet here, a mansion there, with that same divine blessing. I can only

imagine people supporting that vision, many of them desperate. God does not work like that. God does not want us to be wealthy. God wants us to be faithful, which includes both generosity of finances and more so generosity of spirit. Give it away, he told the young man, not accumulate it.

So money, the “M” word yes, to that young man, and to all of us, a clear realization of the power that money can have over us, regardless of how much of it we have.

But the expression of disrupted expectations between Jesus and him goes even deeper than that, and it does for us as well. Perhaps it IS money. But perhaps it is time. Or a value or belief. Something we’ve held onto so tightly even as we’ve been busily and legalistically practicing our faith.

Jesus looks us squarely in the eye, and deep into our soul, as he does the young man, and knows what needs radicalized, what needs transformed, what expectation needs recalibrated for each of us in order to draw us ever closer to God’s dreams for us. Making the stewardship case is easy – and money does matter, so whether it’s how we approach our resources or the way we support the church, we need to ask the question and consider the response.

Yet at a deeper level, when we ask Jesus that core question – how will my life matter, now, and how will it matter forever – we must be ready to have our world rocked. If we are not being transformed every day as we travel with Jesus, then our dive is called to go deeper.

David Ewart asks: ““If we imagine Jesus looking at and loving us, I wonder what is the 'one thing missing' he would see. And what is it that he would ask us to do in order to finally be fully following him?”

David Lose asks “What is it Jesus is asking of you ... right now...? I have no idea. That’s something you ... will need to figure out? But, if you’re anything like me, when you hear his voice first you’ll freeze, terrified that you’ve been found out, and grieving all the plans you’d made for the perfect life. But then you’ll hear him speak again, uttering a word that binds only to set free, that wounds only to heal, that kills only to make alive again. You’ll hear the voice, that is, that tells the truth...”

Expectations disrupted and defied become expectations transformed, in truth, by truth, like our very lives, like our very souls. Now, and forever.

Amen