



August 23, 2015

13th Sunday after Pentecost

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

"Great Expectations"

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the
Lord, and you enduring foundations of the
earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his
people, and he will contend with Israel.

³ 'O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵ O my people, remember now what King
Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of
Beor answered him, and what happened from
Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving
acts of the Lord.'

⁶ 'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come
before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a
year old?

⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of
rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' ⁸ He
has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what

does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with
your God?

I recently saw a cartoon that showed a clergyman pulled over by a trooper. The officer was writing some type of summons. (We know that clergy do not drive fast!) The caption read, "You were preaching 35 minutes in a 20 minute zone." We don't have signs up directing clergy to preach for 20 minutes, but I suspect that it is an expectation that congregants have. We have expectations of each other and worshippers have their expectations of preachers.

When I prepare to enter the pulpit on Sunday morning, I am aware of some of your expectations.

- I should be prepared.
- I should not preach for more than 20 minutes, and if the service goes longer than an hour and 5 minutes, people begin to lose attention, as well as reservations for brunch.
- During that time I should provide enough depth for those looking for depth.
- The sermon should also appeal to younger members.
- The hymns I choose should be new, easy to sing, but also traditional.
- The sermon should be funny, and interesting. It should challenge the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.
- The preacher should not make the congregation feel guilty about their sins and mistakes, however it is ok to point the errors of others. Sermons about sin should be about "them" not "us".
- Did I mention that it should be about 20 minutes?

You get the picture. We come to this moment, indeed every moment of our lives with some expectations. We have expectations of the shopping mall, the school, the township, the county, the government, our spouses, our children, our friends, our neighbors.... And they all have expectations of us, and often that is the source of stress and conflict. Why? Because the most important expectations are tacit. They are never spoken. Tacit expectations only come to the surface when we fail to meet them. Consequently we fret about these things and our minds begin to go to work and begin to manufacture expectations of ourselves that we create.

Pastoral ministry is filled with tacit expectations. Formal job descriptions for pastors seldom include these unspoken expectations of a congregation. One of the reasons for unhappy and short pastorates is the failure to communicate or pick up on these unspoken expectations. One of my tasks as your interim pastor is to lead you to clarify, evaluate, and communicate these expectations.

This morning, my focus is not on the expectations we have of the church, the minister or others. I want to examine the expectations that God has of us, because clarity regarding God's expectations of us gives us the freedom to fully enjoy our relationship with God. The prophets, (particularly Micah) had a way of cutting to the chase and clearly stating God's expectations of humanity. In this time of transition for PPC, it is vital that we explore and clarify God's expectations of us as a community of faith.

I

The people of Israel were wondering this also. What does God expect from us? They asked it in the language of their day, "How shall we come before the Lord?" What does God expect of us as we enter into his presence? Their answers reflect the all too human concern for the extraneous.

1. Shall I come before God and bow down in reverence?
2. Shall I come before God with burnt offerings?
3. Shall I offer calves, valuable calves that are only a year old?
4. How do thousands of rams sound?
5. Does God expect thousands of rivers of olive oil? Will these things meet the expectations that God has?

Then the people ask the harder questions: "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" The people were willing to do or give anything, absolutely anything to meet the expectations that God had of them. No price was too high.

Are we not similar? With what shall we come before God? What does God expect of the people of Poland Presbyterian Church?

- A beautiful sanctuary and flowers?
- A great youth program?
- A great sounding pipe organ?
- Music of the highest quality?
- Robed clergy...

Like the people of Micah's day, churches too often focus on these things. No doubt they are important, and are a reflection of who we are and what we believe. They reflect our inmost selves and our piety. No one should belittle these manifestations of our faith and belief. But the prophet reminds us that these things are superfluous if we do not meet God's primary expectations: first things

II

First things: Micah spelled them out. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." The prophet tells us that God is much more interested in our daily activities than in our religious observances and ceremonies. God, first and foremost wants our lives to be filled with acts of justice, kindness, and humility. Each of these is preceded by an active verb: Do. Love. Walk.

1. **Do justice.** Prophetic justice can be summed up in the expression: caring for the needs of the widow, the orphan, and the alien. This is the same justice that Jesus proclaimed when he exhorted his disciples to provide and minister to "the least of these." The prophetic Jesus tells us that all of our religious ceremonies fail to satisfy unless we treat

others as if they were the messiah, Jesus himself. We know that Jesus was an individual who observed ceremony and kept kosher, but the just treatment of others was primary to all of these other expressions. Poland Presbyterian Church is called to be active in pursuing justice. Our world is filled with "the least of these".

This summer, Poland Presbyterian Church was challenged by the mission committee to take a step in faith by supporting Dave Lang in his plans to help with the rebuilding of Nepal, following the devastating earthquake. Dave's willingness to travel halfway around the world is an act of hands on justice. The prophet exhorts us to "do justice". Not support it. Not preach about it. Not reflect on it. Do it!

2. **Love kindness:** The word that the prophet used that we translate as "kindness" is hesed. It means love, loyalty, faithfulness and mercy. It is the heart of healthy relationships of all types. Lois Tverberg, in Our Rabbi Jesus wrote,
 - "Hesed is a bone-weary father who drives throughout the night to bail his drugaddict son out of jail.
 - Hesed is a mom who spends day after thankless day spoon-feeding and wiping up after a disabled child.
 - Hesed is an unsung pastor's wife whose long-suffering tearful prayers keep her exhausted husband from falling apart at the seams.
 - Hesed is love that can be counted on, decade after decade." *God expects us to keep kindness, hesed (kindness) at the core of our relationships. Love kindness. We are called to embrace the virtue of kindness as a life partner.
3. **Walk humbly with God.** This is a beautiful image because it describes the nature of the life of faith. It is a walk, a pilgrimage. It is a walk with God. This walk requires humility on our part because we need to acknowledge that we are not in charge, we are not alone... we are not masters of the universe. Jesus described himself in John's gospel as "the way, the truth, and the life." Walking humbly with God is to walk with Jesus on the way of truth and faithfulness. Walking humbly means that Christian faith is not merely an existential decision, (that moment "I first believed.") It is a lifelong journey. We are called to "walk the walk." Walk humbly with God.

We live with expectations. The prophet Micah has given us a gift, telling us clearly what God expects of us. There are so many extra things, and they are nice and should be celebrated... organs, and hymnals, preachers, buildings, programs and ministries, but let us always attend to first things: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Amen.

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