

"Contrary to Expectations"  
Matthew 16:21-28

September 3, 2017

13<sup>TH</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Tomorrow is Labor Day. It is the final holiday of the summer months. It was originally designed to honor the labor of the American worker. Therefore, you might think it would make sense to labor on Labor Day in order to honor labor. However, contrary to expectations, instead of laboring on Labor Day, tomorrow is a day to avoid labor at all costs as we camp, fish, golf, gather together with family, cook on the grill, and so on. It's kind of funny. We play instead of work. We rest instead of labor. We honor something by not doing it. Isn't that a bit strange? To me, it's like going to a strawberry festival and being served blueberries. It's contrary to our expectations.

Often in life, we have strong expectations. These may be expectations of our politicians, our sports heroes, our friends and family, and many others. We expect these people to act in certain ways and we are shocked, upset, saddened, even angry when they act contrary to our expectations. Nowhere is this truer than in our expectations of God. We expect God to act in a certain way and are disappointed when He acts contrary to our expectations. We see this illustrated for us in our Gospel reading for today.

First of all, we have expectations about the nature of the kingdom of God. The Jews at Jesus time expected the Messiah to establish a mighty kingdom on earth. Success would be measured numerically, economically, and politically. Do we not think the same way? Many live by what Martin Luther called "a theology of glory". Basically, this means looking for the kingdom of God in the glory and success of the kingdoms of earth. We look for and yearn for churches which have the most members, the biggest buildings, and the most bucks. We may become sad or upset or envious if our church doesn't measure up to these obviously God-blessed manifestations of his kingdom.

Secondly, we have expectations about the nature of life in the kingdom of God. The Jews at Jesus time expected the Messiah to have a long and successful life. We expect the same thing for ourselves as followers of the Messiah Jesus. As Christians, I think we expect to live long and to be successful. Books such as "Your Best Life Now" encourages that way of thinking which says God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and successful.

Thirdly, we have expectations about our needs and our desires in the kingdom of God. Worldly philosophy encourages us to follow your heart, to fulfill your desires, and have all that you want. That philosophy is leaking into our churches these days. People are told that, if they just believe hard enough and pray long enough, they can have whatever their heart desires and that God wants them to have it.

Fourth, we have expectations regarding the quality of life in the kingdom of God. Following Jesus should bring us peace and free us from all conflict. We expect the Church to be respected and accepted by the various institutions in our society. As

Christians, we should be able to enjoy life and live a life of ease because we believe in Jesus.

In our Gospel reading for today though, Jesus acts contrary to many of our most beloved expectations. First, Jesus acts contrary to our expectation of the nature of the kingdom of God. He says to His disciples that the kingdom of God is not about power, might, and glory, nor will it be established that way. The kingdom of God (that is, God's rule and reign on earth) consists of weakness, suffering, and humility and would be established in that way. Jesus tells His disciples that He is going to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be arrested by them.

Secondly, Jesus acts contrary to our expectation of success in the kingdom of God. Success in the kingdom of God is nothing like success in the kingdoms of earth. Jesus is not going to Jerusalem to have His "best life now" and experience a long and glorious reign from a golden throne in Jerusalem. Rather, Jesus was going to have His "worst life now" and experience and agonizing and painful death on a wooden cross outside of Jerusalem.

Thirdly, Jesus acts contrary to our expectations of what it means to be a disciple. It is not a life of blessings and met needs. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself." Following Jesus does not mean getting everything your heart desires if you just believe enough and pray hard. Instead, we should be prepared to deny our once and even our needs in order to follow Jesus.

Fourthly, Jesus acts contrary to our expectations of life in the kingdom of God. It is often a life of pain and suffering, persecution and rejection, and sadness and grief. Jesus encourages His disciples, to "take up his cross". As Jesus was Himself going the way that leads to a cross and untold suffering, so those who purport to be His followers should expect to go the same way and suffer many of the same things.

All of this must've gotten to the glory seeking disciples. Peter stood up and spoke that which must've been on the minds of the other disciples, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Now, whether Peter criticized because he thought Jesus was mistaken or out of some misguided attempt to protect Jesus, Peter's words were clear: Jesus was wrong.. That was not what the kingdom was all about. That's not how the kingdom should be established. That's not how Jesus should reign in the kingdom. That's not how we should live in the kingdom.

We often enjoy criticizing Peter for the things that he says because he is so often wrong. However, I think we would basically agree with Peter and what he says here. We, too, think the kingdom is all about glory and success. That is why we often measure the Church with the standards of this world: numbers, dollars, and the perception of others. We, too, like to think of Jesus as the glorious King, rather than the suffering Savior. Just look at the way Jesus is often depicted in modern art and music. We, too, like to think that following Jesus means relief from all our suffering, satisfaction for all of our wants and needs, and an easy and peaceful life.

Jesus has something to say about the way of thinking expressed by Peter and often practiced by us. Jesus' words are not flattering or conciliatory. Jesus says, "Get

behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man.” These ideas of the kingdom of God and life in the kingdom are not merely bad ideas or misinterpretations. They are satanic in nature. They express the thoughts of sinful man while denying the will of God. They reveal a lack of trust in the word of God and an open rejection of His plan of salvation.

Given Jesus’ clear words, we might expect God to condemn our unbelief and punish our rejection of Him. But, once again, God acts contrary to our expectations. He uses what we and many others might consider to be a great failure – Jesus’ painful and shameful death on a cross – to accomplish His greatest success. He accepts Jesus’ death as the sacrifice for all sin and the satisfaction of God’s righteous anger. Far from being a detriment or hindrance to the kingdom of God, as Peter thought, it is the very way God established His kingdom: through the forgiveness of sins and the justification (that is being declared right by God) by faith. Through Jesus’ death on the cross. All of your sins have been forgiven and you have been declared right by God through faith as members of the kingdom of God

However, the story doesn’t end there. Jesus was more than a martyr for a good cause who died heroically. Again, God acts contrary to our expectations which say death means death. What was missed by Peter and often overlooked by us is that Jesus was raised by God to life on the third day. There is more to the kingdom of God than simply suffering and death. There is resurrection and life. Although life in the kingdom of God following Jesus Christ is often difficult and disheartening, the destination has been assured. As God raised Jesus out of the tomb and to new life again, He will raise us out of our graves to eternal life in heaven with Him. That is assured.

As far as life in the kingdom goes until the resurrection, we might expect that this is a life full of blessings and lacking suffering. We expect that our life of faith will make us happy and always feel good. C. S. Lewis, well-known Christian author who, for many years, was an atheist once said, “I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”

Once again, Jesus acts contrary to our expectations. When He calls us to follow Him, He literally means to follow him – to go the same way which He has gone. It is a way which denies self and lives for others. Many in the news media are trumpeting the fact that people are being so kind and helpful to those suffering because of Hurricane Harvey. They also lament the fact that this usually happens only during the time of disaster. As Christians, we are called to live a life (not just in a time of disaster) which denies our wants and needs and, instead, lives for our neighbor in need. St. Paul compiles a long list of examples of how to do this in our epistle reading for today and I commend it to you for further reading. This is how Jesus lived and we are following Him.

The way of Jesus leads to suffering and a cross. He calls us to follow him there, as well. According to our expectations, this seems to be very bad. But God acted

contrary to our expectations and, instead, uses it for good. God used Jesus' suffering and death to gain forgiveness and life forever for all people. There is no forgiveness apart from suffering and death. There is no resurrection apart from death. There is no salvation apart from resurrection. By taking up our cross and following Him, we are going the way that leads to forgiveness, resurrection, and salvation in heaven for all eternity.

Sometimes, things are not always as we expect them to be: honoring work by not working, celebrating strawberries by eating blueberries, and so on when one operates contrary to our expectations, we often feel disappointed, angry, and deprived because we think we won't get what we have coming to us. However, when it comes to dealing with God, we thank Him that he is acted contrary to us and our way of thinking. Our ways, although they seem well and are generally accepted by the world, are the ways of Satan which lead a good life now, but eternal death later. Although the initial emblems of God's plan (the cross, deprivation of desires, physical suffering and death) seem bad they are precisely the way which leads to life, complete satisfaction, and perfect pleasure which lasts an eternity. Amen