
Grate Expectations
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16

In the opening of the 2002 movie called “About Schmidt”, Warren Schmidt is about to retire from his lifelong job in insurance. The movie opens with Warren sitting at his desk beside a pile of packed boxes. Watching the clock tick away - second by second - towards 5 o’clock. At which point he leaves his office for the last time ever. While he waits, he looks disappointed. As the movie unfolds, we come to see that his disappointment is based on his expectations about retirement.

Warren’s wife, Helen, has forced the purchase of a recreational vehicle, and Warren expects - but is not really looking forward to - spending a lot of time on the road. Warren’s daughter, Jeannie, has met her soul-mate, and Warren expects - but is not looking forward to - her wedding. At Warren’s retirement party, his replacement speaks highly of Warren, and hints that he may need to consult with Warren from time to time. But Warren is worried about not feeling needed when he does not have a job to go to.

But life rarely unfolds as expected. When Warren drops by the office after his retirement the “new guy” is not interested in any help Warren has to offer. Even worse, on his way out of the building Warren sees his carefully organized boxes and files - the symbol of his entire career - unopened, in a pile of garbage. Shortly after his retirement party, Warren’s wife, Helen, dies. In his grief, Warren spends time with his wife’s personal effects. He discovers letters that reveal that years earlier, Helen had had an affair with Warren’s best friend. And at Helen's funeral Warren finally meets his daughter's fiancé. This only confirms his belief that his daughter “could have done a lot better” in finding a husband.

So in the early parts of the movie, Warren’s goes from a very predictable life to a life of great uncertainty. Warren loses his job, then his wife, then his best friend. All that Warren has to look forward to is an increasing sense of separation between himself and

his daughter as she gets married to someone that he strongly disapproves of.

I wonder if that is how the Hebrew people felt in our story today. In that mythical story the people were leaving slavery, but they were leaving many other things too - they were leaving a known world behind. A world where they had occupations that gave their lives meaning. A world where they had homes, friends, and all of the normal things that make up life. A world where they knew what to do when they woke up each morning. Just like with Warren, perhaps the Hebrew people were not in love with every aspect of their former life in Egypt. But it was what they were used to. And that gave them a sense of comfort, meaning and purpose. It was their life.

In today's reading, there is a particular focus on the idea that in Egypt, the people had plenty of food. This is in contrast to wherever they are wandering now, where the people are starving. In the story, God provides food for the people. But oddly, they do not see it. They do not understand it. They don't recognize that what they see - the fine flaky substance - was food. That is why in the story Moses has to tell the people "it's food".

The people complained because they thought they did not have what they needed to thrive, and yet - it was right in front of them. Can you imagine such a thing! Well of course we can because we do that all the time ourselves. In our collective defence, I would point out that it is hard to recognize something you are not expecting to see.

Another example of something unexpected is our gospel story today. The story just seems so wrong. It goes against almost everything I was raised to believe. It goes against my expectations. Jesus shares a view of the Kingdom of God as a place where all workers get the same pay - regardless of how long they worked. Regardless of whether they worked through the heat of the day.

What happened to "the early bird gets the worm"? What about the American proverb that says, "Success is a ladder you cannot climb with your hands in your pockets"? What about the adage, "The only thing that comes to us without effort is old age"? Or this one - The only place that "success" comes before "work" in the dictionary. And - my personal favourite - "The difference between 'try' and 'triumph' is a little 'umph'."

We expect to work for things. And we expect that we get rewarded for our efforts.

So where does Jesus get off saying that all the workers - those who worked all day and those who worked a few minutes - should be payed the same. To our modern ears this story just seems to be let's be honest ... it seems unfair. Even in the Exodus story, God provides food for all, the workers, the dreamers, and hackers and the slackers. Is that fair?

That is why I titled this reflection “Grate Expectations”. No - that’s not typo. I meant “grate” in the sense of expectations that grate on us. Or perhaps it’s reality that sometimes grates on us. Or maybe its both. But what do we do when reality does not meet up to our expectations?

Classically, there are 2 answers. The more popular answer is that of course our expectations are just fine. Therefore, reality has failed us. Other people have let us down. Our governments have let us down. The church has let you down. You can make your own list of who has let you down. The simple and popular answer is to complain and find someone to blame.

The other answer - the less popular answer - to the question of what we should do when reality does not live up to our expectations - is to realize that perhaps our expectations are not very helpful. Perhaps our expectations of reality are unrealistic. Perhaps blaming other people for the situations we find ourselves in accomplishes nothing. Perhaps we are actually involved in our own reality if not our own salvation.

Blogger “MaryAnn” of simplemarriage.net says, “A good working definition of expectations is planned disappointment. ... When what we expect to happen does not happen, we are disappointed and we suffer pain at some level. ... Ironically, we are also likely to be unhappy even when our expectations ARE met!”¹ That’s because we are not overly happy when good things happen - if we expect them. To feel truly grateful, we usually need something good to happen that we do not expect. “Gratitude is the key to happiness and anything that undermines gratitude must undermine happiness. And nothing undermines gratitude as much as expectations. The more expectations you have, the less gratitude you will have.”²

And what about us? What about our expectations? Perhaps we feel like we are

¹ <https://simplemarriage.net/expectations-equal-unhappiness/>

² Ibid.

wandering, like Warren, or like the Hebrew people. Perhaps we feel like we have left a situation where we at least knew what to expect. I still have a lot to learn about the history of this congregation, but I know that we have a collective memory of a time when we had a larger congregation, a larger choir, more children, perhaps a minister with a better sense of humour! Many of us here can look back to a time when life was different.

And perhaps we even long for that former life. In the words of Chilean writer Michaela Bruzzes, “Like the Israelites, our faith often gives way and we find ourselves longing for the comfort and security of spiritual slavery, someone telling us what is right and wrong, what to do, where to go. We long for a ‘Santa Claus God’ who will allow us to remain spiritually passive and dependent, not a God who demands our input and active effort to maintain the covenant.”

It is natural to yearn for our past. And that’s ok to a point. But we should not let our yearning for the past interfere with our ability to find gratitude in the present.

The people in the exodus story did not recognize the food that was right in front of them because they were looking for the wrong thing - they were looking for the food they had in Egypt. In the wilderness, nourishment was right there with them, and yet they did not recognize it. We need to do the same thing ourselves. We need to learn to see the nourishment that is all around us, knowing that it may or may not look like nourishment we had in the past. It’s not that what nourished us in the past was wrong. It’s just that we are living today. Here and now.

That was something I really loved about the pandemic. Because the pandemic forced churches to face a new reality called “today”. Most churches I knew were struggling with their identity long before the pandemic. But the pandemic forced us to make quick changes. The pandemic forced us to reconsider what it means to “be church”. But if we are honest, we know that conversation started long before anyone knew how to spell COVID. The church - and our congregation - have been in transition for a while.

We may yearn for our past - for lots of good reasons. But Jesus calls us to something better. Something deeper. This week I tried to find that Bible story where Jesus tells the disciples to gather people together so that they can fill pews in a particular building once a week. But I couldn’t find that story in the Bible. Perhaps my Bible is

abridged or something. Because I could have sworn that story was in the Bible somewhere. Then, I tried to find that Bible story where Jesus tells the disciples to get people to dress up and play nicely with each other 1 hour every week. And you know what? I couldn't find that story either. So what are we called to do?

In our gospel today, Jesus calls us to create community where all people have enough. Jesus calls us to a Kingdom where we are happy to all be paid the same - because we are all paid enough. This is similar to what we now call a "living wage". Normally, the term "living wage" refers on money. But I see it more broadly than that. I think that to live well we need money, yes. But to live and to thrive we need other things. We need to live well financially, but also physically, mentally, relationally, emotionally, spiritually, and communally. In other words, we need to work to create the kingdom of God here and now. A Kingdom where we all share and we all have enough. A community of love, caring, and compassion.

Our question is - how will we as a church help contribute to making that happen right here. That's a much higher vision than just filling pews. Thanks be to God for that.

One thing that drew me to this congregation is the community in which we are living. News flash. Most of Canada is predominately white and predominantly Christian. But the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood and our congregation are very diverse. That's why I love it here.

This is such an exciting time to be in the church, don't you think? As the needs in our community change, and as our own needs change, we are invited to imagine what church can look like in 2024.

This neighbourhood is a landing place for many new immigrants and refugees. Newcomers come here, and when they find their feet, many of them move on to other places. The average residency here is about only about 5 years. And statistically, the majority of newcomers are Muslim. Of the newcomers who are Christian, the majority of them are Roman Catholic. And here we sit, a Protestant Church. Here we sit as the United Church of Canada. A church that newcomers have never heard of because we only exist in Canada (plus I think 6 congregations in Bermuda actually).

Does that ever make you wonder - what on earth are we doing here? Does our

community need us? Would our community care - or even notice - if we went away? Well, the answer is ... yes. I think that we are in a wonderful, unique position. Because we are in a minority situation. We are can be a still, small voice in our community.

In the movie About Schmidt, by the end of the movie we realize that in the process of losing everything that was important to him - Warren found something new that he cared about. Before Helen died, he was channel-surfing and came upon an advertisement for an agency that helps support children overseas - similar to World Vision. He sponsors a single child. And the agency told Warren that he should write to this child. And so throughout most of the movie, Warren writes to the child, Ndugu. And when you watch the movie you get to read the letters. And through that process, Warren not only gives life to a child, he finds his own new life too.

God provides. But God does not always provide what we expect. Let us look - together - with fresh eyes at ourselves and our community. We will find new life. And if you don't know where to look, start with gratitude.

I'm so glad to be with you all as we move into our future together.

Amen.