

“EXPLODED EXPECTATIONS”

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
July 5, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Good morning, everyone!

Well, we've officially started summer. For those counting days of sheltering in place, we're now well over Day 100. Over 11 million people have been infected with COVID, over 500,000 have died. And – maybe not here in New York, but elsewhere -- the numbers just seem to be rocketing up. Graduations have occurred, one way or the other, and colleges and schools are finalizing their plans for the fall semester. Racial justice has been at the forefront of our minds, with protests and gatherings and some significant changes already in the works, but so much more to be done. Let's hope we don't lose the momentum to make real and lasting progress. July 4th celebrations came and went, maybe some surprise fireworks here and there, but this 244th year of our country's birth brings with it some deep concern about whether those beloved ideals of liberty and democracy will survive much longer.

And we are tired, tired of these routines we never chose, tired of having to hold back on our touches, tired of having our very survival at the front of our minds. I even had a dream a couple of weeks ago, the other night, that all I could pray about or preach about was being weary. Well, wouldn't you know, this morning's scriptures from the lectionary, yes: “Come to me, all you that are weary.” All I can say is, well, at least that put a refreshing smile on my face. But I'll take direction from my sermon title, Exploded Expectations, and I will *not* be preaching on being weary today.

So this summer, we're in these in-between weeks, after our dear Pastor Bob has retired and before Pastor Greg joins us around Labor Day, these upcoming eight weeks or so. Well, your pastoral staff -- Barbara and Hannah Faye and Audrey and myself – we put our heads together about what we might do to give an adrenaline push, a bit of turbo charge, to put this summer's preaching on an exciting and relevant track. These are the months in the church calendar we call “Ordinary Time,” when normally green is the color of the stoles and the sanctuary banners, it's the 34 weeks of the year when it's not Advent and Christmas or Lent and Easter and Pentecost.

In these unprecedented times in our world, we're both challenged and opened to new spiritual possibilities, learning to tell our stories in new ways, learning new things about the importance of our faith and our spiritual practices, learning new ways to prepare ourselves for the changes that will continue afresh with each new day and each news cycle.

So in this our Ordinary Time of the church year, we've come up with a theme for these 8 or 9 weeks. Our theme for these sermons: “Not Such Ordinary Time.” This series aims to explore the possibilities in these “not so ordinary days” through the eyes of familiar characters and stories and scriptures, for seeing community life in a new way as we ask new questions for our lives in our “not so ordinary time.”

You know, reflecting on the liturgical green of our Ordinary Time, or rather our Not Such Ordinary Time, I picked up a book by Jim Henson the other day, attributed to Kermit the Frog, called “It's Not Easy Being Green.” Now there would be a sermon series – in our “not so ordinary time,” I guess it's not easy being the green of ordinary, Ordinary Time. Everything is different these days. Nothing is the same

green of our usual routine. Maybe Kermit had something there, with his siren song, “It’s not easy being green.”

Expectations can certainly lead to the wrong conclusions, and on that topic I’m reminded of a funny story. On a tour of a facility, a facility for those people who – well, let’s just say for those people who had lost touch with reality, one know-it-all reporter asked the director, “How can you decide whether someone has lost touch with reality, enough to enter your program?” “Simple,” the director said. “I ask them one question: if you had to empty a full bathtub and you had a teaspoon, a measuring cup, and a bucket, how would you empty the tub?” The self-confident reporter answered, “of course, it’s the bucket, since it’s much larger than the teaspoon or the cup.” The director replied, “Well, I think we might have a room here for you too, if you’d like. Most people would say, to empty the tub, you just pull out the drain plug.”

Yes, expectations can lead to incorrect conclusions. But humbleness about our faith, and our own certainty we have the answers, if we regularly reach back to the touchstones of our faith, maybe we might lower the chances that we’ll go off in the wrong direction.

Today’s scriptures are about exploded expectations, and have some very fun images in them. To get the full richness of these verses, we’ve got to look a bit deeper into what they would have meant to the listeners at the time they were written.

These verses from Matthew start off with Jesus giving us some vivid images. He’s talking about what he calls the people of “this generation” – those words in the bible meant people of the times who were unfaithful and unrepentant and defiant of God. For his first image, he paints the picture of children in the village marketplace, who can’t decide what to do. “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance” – that’s a reference to what happens at weddings, at joyous celebrations. “We wailed, and you did not mourn” – well, that’s a reference to what happens at funerals. So Jesus is comparing the unfaithful of “this generation” to children who can’t decide what to do, when they can do anything from one extreme to the other.

Then he paints another picture, contrasting John the Baptist and Jesus, and again calling out the unfaithful for their lack of conviction. John neither ate nor drank, and because of his austere lifestyle, they called John a demon. Jesus did eat and drink, and they called him a glutton and a drunkard. John lived an ascetic life in the desert. Jesus flouts the dietary rules, eats with outcasts, heals on the Sabbath – he’s the one with the bad reputation. So John appears to be a religious fanatic, Jesus seems to be the bad boy.

The gossiping and unfaithful people of “this generation” criticized both. Taking offense at both means not having to follow the call of either. Like the children in the marketplace, they can’t decide on whether to play wedding or funeral games, and so wind up not playing at all. They don’t know whether to eat and drink, or not to eat and drink. And they refuse to hear the messages from both John and Jesus, whose approaches come from different directions on the social distancing spectrum of their times.

Jesus and John were of course giving the message, for those who took them seriously, that people must examine themselves and change their ways. Both messages shock, explode prior expectations, and push listeners into a place that’s uncomfortable. And for those who don’t like being uncomfortable, it’s far easier to criticize than to obey.

So just as we Presbyterians feel good about the responsiveness of change – after all, we are reformed and ever reforming – maybe too we need to deal with feeling uncomfortable. Change is disruptive, change is uncomfortable. In order to change, to make change, we must get used to, and accept, being uncomfortable. I guess maybe, as Christians, we must become comfortable with discomfort.

The job of an artist is to disrupt things, make us question what we thought before, open our eyes and our hearts to being inspired to change. Who knows, maybe in our troubled waters of these summer 2020 days, activists and protesters are taking on that role of the artist. Now there's an image: demonstrators as the artists of our day.

I'm often awestruck at some of these artistic moments of inspiration in the news. There's our daily ritual as New Yorkers, banging pots and pans at 7:00 pm to honor all those medical workers and essential workers. But then, to multiply even that inspiration, seeing those same front-line workers, those nurses and doctors, banging pots for the protesters. Now that explodes expectations.

Or a recent release from the American Bar Association. Now we all know too many bad jokes about lawyers, mostly about their reputation for heartlessness. But that group of ABA lawyers gave some advice to its members in these turbulent times – as lawyers, we need to lead with empathy. Well, there are certainly some exploded expectations there.

There's a call out to clergy on this Fourth of July Sunday, a call for preachers to join in a national commitment to prophesy against pandemics, to mention the 3 pandemics of our time: the coronavirus, poverty, and structural racism. Organized by the Poor People's Campaign for Moral Revival, and the Repairers of the Breach, and the Kairos Center, it strives to give a new perspective on our national birthday celebrations. The call for prophesy is based on the 1852 Fourth of July address by Frederick Douglass, 168 years ago, where Douglass explodes expectations about our national celebration, in light of persistent slavery. Hear his words:

“What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes.

It is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.”¹

Maybe like our own worship services where we start with our humble prayers of confession at the beginning, and then turn only later in the service to our prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude, maybe we should start all our celebrations with some deep self-reflection. But of course, life is not so simple, certainly not in these “not so ordinary times.” Even in the rawness and the emotion of unspeakable criminal acts by racist police, we also see images of police kneeling to honor the protests, acknowledging that many of the services that police currently provide because no one else is doing it – social work, medical and mental evaluation, homelessness – might be better served by shifting some funding to those essential services.

Former President Obama recently observed that historically the leaders of movements towards justice were young people, people with fresh perspectives. Dr. King was a young man, as was Cesar Chavez, the people who catalyzed the feminist movement, movements on the environment, racism, LGBTQ rights. All young people who exploded expectations, who were awakened and motivated and energized to take on the problems of injustice. People who were ok with being uncomfortable, and speaking their uncomfortable truths. And so, Obama continued, when he begins to get weary and disillusioned and full of despair about all the hardships and disruptions of our time, he remains firmly optimistic for the future

that the generation of our children will bring into being.² May we all carry with us, throughout our lives, that same spirit of youthful enthusiasm for justice.

It's certainly true that turbulent times bring opportunity. Businesspeople recite the mantra of not wasting a good crisis. Every Disney story has at its critical moment the ability to seize hope out of the deepest darkness. And even airplane pilots have their perspective: when everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.

The hope of our faith gives us that same optimism. Our openness to new ways of looking afresh is at the center of who we are as Christians, called to humility, called to be servants to the needs of the world.

I was watching a documentary that included clips from that 1970's show, "All in the Family." And I got some new insight as I was listening to the show's creator Norman Lear talk about Edith, the compassionate and deeply ethical wife of bigoted character Archie Bunker. They observed that Edith's character was the ultimate in WWJD, What Would Jesus Do, as she navigated the changing world around her. Edith was always listening and open-minded, when necessary even standing up to her closed-minded husband. Edith seemed always to have the right touchstones of openness, empathy, and love. She exploded expectations. I have to smile at that image – Edith Bunker as the ultimate expression of the "What Would Jesus Do" movement.

There is something, though, to this uncomfortable Christianity. We are most likely to encounter Christ in the humble and the vulnerable, people at the margins, children and strangers. They may be poets and artists, who challenge us to see the world a little differently. They may be people who see things that others do not, challenging the ideals over which we argue and divide, exploding our expectations, shedding light on our arrogance and entitlement.

But our faith is not meant to make us uncomfortable to break us down, oh no. Rather, to reveal to us, our brokenness, to uncover and heal what is broken, through God's grace and mercy.

And that's exactly where the final verses of our scripture take us. The ending of these scripture verses are meant to give comfort to the uncomfortable who follow Jesus. And the words are all so familiar to us.

"Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." Throughout the old testament, from the Psalms to the Prophets to Ecclesiastes, Wisdom is a personified image – most frequently female -- that is a characteristic of God. And of course, Jesus is Wisdom incarnate. The words of the scripture, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," is a message repeated by Jesus over and over. By their fruits shall you know them. It's not "Do as I say and not as I do." Instead, it's look to my actions, my outcomes, in order to make a judgement.

And those other words of comfort in today's verses:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke, my burdens upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The yokes, the wooden collars worn by beasts of burden today, would have been a familiar image of oppression in Roman times, used by laborers to carry a far-too heavy burden, used by Romans to keep prisoners suppressed. Jesus says to those who know heavy yokes: take my yoke, for my yoke is easy.

We can choose which master in life we will serve. And although God forces the faithful, God forces us, to be uncomfortable, being a follower of Jesus actually makes our burdens lighter. It's clear how we must act, it's clear how we should be gentle and humble in heart. It's a lot easier and will make us a lot happier

than living out other values, than serving a different master. Come to me, follow me, Jesus says, and I will give you rest. An easy yoke and a light burden – well, that makes for a gentle journey.

It's not that Jesus invites us to a life of ease. His way will be challenging and will make us uncomfortable. It will explode our prior expectations. However, our lives of humble service will be full of freedom and joy, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove ourselves, over and over, joyful as we rest securely in God's grace.

Since it's summertime and traditionally a time of vacation, and maybe a time too when we miss a few more Sundays at church, I leave you with another funny story. Three ministers were discussing the problem of bats in the attic at church and how difficult they were to get rid of. The first minister said that his congregation had tried "smoking them out", but they still came back. Another had tried poisoning them, but enough survived to repopulate the attic. The third minister shared his solution: "I did what I always do in my church, I just baptized and confirmed them all, and they NEVER came back!"

So as we go into our turbulent world, let's be the best Christians we can be, exploding expectations, comfortable with discomfort, resting in the peace and grace of our God.

Amen.

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¹ Frederick Douglass, Oration Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1852, republished in Philip Foner, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, International Publishers Co. NY, 1950.

² Zoom/YouTube June 3, 2020 town hall event organized by the Obama Foundation subsidiary, My Brother's Keeper Alliance.