

Sermon For October 9, 2016 - "Expectations vs. Gratitude"

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here to read the scripture passages for the day](#)

Expectations vs. Gratitude

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus helped 10 people with leprosy. All of them were cleansed; but only the one who gave thanks is said to have been healed - only the grateful one is told he has been made well. There's something healing in practicing gratitude. We experience well-being when we say thank you.

Singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer has a poem called "Three Gratitudes" that speaks to this. The poem begins:

"Every night before I go to sleep
I say out loud
Three things that I'm grateful for,
All the significant, insignificant
Extraordinary, ordinary stuff of my life.
It's a small practice and humble,
And yet, I find I sleep better
Holding what lightens and softens my life
Ever so briefly at the end of the day."

My spouse Matt and I have taken up this practice. It is so helpful. Even after brutally hard days, there are always at least three things we can say, even if one of them is, "I'm so grateful this day is over!" We're usually surprised by what softens and lightens our lives. It's often the little things, the simple things, that bring healing and hope - the way the light turns the bluffs orange at day break, the kindness of a cashier at the grocery store, warm socks. It's profoundly healing to say thank you. Even on days when nothing goes as we'd expected, the practice of gratitude softens and lightens us. And God knows we need softening and lightening in a culture that tells us we're entitled to get whatever we want, whenever we want it, from anyone, any time and that life should always live up to our expectations. A sense of entitlement and lots of expectations about how life should go can make us rigid, bitter and impatient - kind of like Namaan in our first lesson today. We'll get to him, but first, think with me a little bit about expectations and how they help and hurt us.

A friend once told me that expectations are premeditated resentments. We were on a trip with other Lutheran campus pastors to the Taize community in France and we all had very high expectations for our trip. It was right after the school year ended and we felt we really deserved some serious relaxation and

rejuvenation. Yet nothing at Taize was as we'd anticipated. The food was horrible and none of us ever got a hot shower, not even once, even though the community does have functioning water heaters. Instead of practicing gratitude, we all got to griping about everything, all the time. Finally, after listening to another round of "if only it were like this", my friend Paul said, "you know, I think expectations are premeditated resentments." At first I was shocked by that. I thought expectations were a good thing. And I still do.

We should have expectations, high expectations, for how we will treat each other and live together. We should have high expectations of our leaders, our government and ourselves. These kinds of expectations are helpful.

What becomes problematic is when we expect everything and everyone to conform to our demands and desires. Then we are so often disappointed and resentful. What's worse, our rigid expectations can keep us from seeing and experiencing the surprising, good things God is up to in our world and in our lives.

That was the case for Naaman in our first lesson today. Naaman had very strong ideas about how he should be treated and how his healing from leprosy should happen. After all, he was a commander of a mighty army who'd won great battles for the King of Aram. He was likely quite angry that he had leprosy; back then, leprosy was seen as a punishment. Such a mighty, powerful and successful warrior shouldn't even have leprosy in the first place. He certainly was entitled to a cure. So, when Naaman learned from his wife's servant that there was a prophet in her homeland who could cure him, he expected a grand, elaborate miracle. He went to the king of Israel, his enemy, with a letter that suggests he even may have expected the king himself to cure him.

But things unfolded very differently than Naaman had imagined. Instead of healing him, the king tore his clothes and threw up his hands in despair. Then the king sent him away to the podunk rural house of some strange prophet. The prophet Elisha didn't even come out of his house to see Naaman. Instead, he sent a servant out to talk to him. And the message the servant gave Naaman was most peculiar - "Go wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Naaman was furious. He stormed away saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy." Instead, a servant instructed him to wash in the dingy, dirty, tiny little Jordan river, a river that was nothing compared to those of his home in Damascus. Naaman was not impressed and his very high expectations almost prevented him from experiencing the healing God had in store for him.

The same is often true for us. Our expectations can prevent us from seeing what God is doing for us and experiencing what God has in store for us. My trip to Taize was life-changing but I almost missed it because I was annoyed about having to sleep on bunk beds. But God did not give up on Naaman and God does not give up on us. Three times in Naaman's story, help came through people he would least expect - through servants: his wife's servant, Elisha's servant, and his own servants. Of course this shouldn't be so surprising when you step back and consider how God works. Throughout scripture, God expresses special concern for the poor and powerless and emphasizes the importance of learning from them. But, it is most surprising that the powerful, egotistical Naaman actually listened to these servants. God worked through these servants to bring messages of truth to Naaman. And God worked in Naaman's life to open him to hear and so receive the healing God had in store for him.

In the same way, God is at work in our lives amidst all our impatience, irritability and rigidity, amidst all the times we strut and storm away. Through it all God is patiently waiting and working. God is at work to open us to truth spoken through those who are lowly and less powerful - through outcasts, refugees, protesters and strangers. God is at work in ways that can seem so small and insignificant - in water and word, bread and wine,

peanut butter drives and school kits. God is at work to help us experience gratitude at the end of each day, even when life is difficult.

Expectations can be problematic, but hope does not disappoint us. God frees us from our unrealistic expectations and our impossible demands so that we can face the future with high hopes. We can trust that God is at work in our lives to open us to receive the good that God has in store for us and for our world. We can say thank you. We can return to the waters of baptism and pray for a hurting world.

Let's take a few moments to do that now. Amen.