

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse
Square on Sunday July 8th, 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Violated Expectations”**

Yesterday I found myself reading some serious reflections about a humorous subject... literally. The words were written by three professors from the University of Hawaii, and their subject?... one-line jokes. The article was headed “Disjunctor Selection for One-Line Jokes”... wow!!! At one point they write, “Our basic premise is that one-line jokes are humorous because they violate the initial expectations of the listener, and that this violation is resolved by shifting from the initial knowledge frame used to understand the joke to another completely different knowledge frame “.

Without a doubt Naaman, from our first reading, “had his initial expectations violated” and his problem was only resolved “by shifting from the initial knowledge frame to one completely different”.

Naaman was a man to be reckoned with in every way. He was a high-level commander (a sort of chief of staff in the leader’s privy council), he was “a great man”, politically savvy and well-placed, and “a mighty warrior” – it is this man that heads for Israel in order to secure his healing.

As a man of great possessions, he expects money will be an essential part of this ‘healer-dealing’ – and so he takes with him ten thousand talents of silver, six thousand talents of gold and ten sets of garments... but his expectations are soon to be violated.

As a man of significant power he expects the prophet to appear before him, he is not accustomed to dealing with messengers and subordinates... but his expectations are soon to be violated.

And as a man of prestige and style, he expects that if he must wash in a river, it will undeniably be the clean and social waters of Abana and Pharpar... definitely not the socially and hygienically muddied waters of the Jordan... but, yet again, his expectations are soon to be violated.

And what happens when his expectations are not met, they are not fulfilled, they are not respected... well, none too surprisingly, Naaman “becomes angry and walks away”. Anger, resentment,

isolation – these reactions to violated expectations are surely not peculiar nor restricted to Naaman... they are in fact surprisingly common. Perhaps that is why some wise, though somewhat cynical, person once quipped, “Expectations are resentments waiting to happen”.

Before ever Jesus commissions and dispatches his disciples, he labours hard to prepare them for “violated expectations”. Yes, you are carrying the message and presence of the Kingdom of God with all its promise of power, healing, strength but do not expect an unqualified welcome nor red-carpet treatment wherever you go. No ticker-tape parade for those first missionaries, carriers of grace. Some will ignore and belittle you at best; revile and persecute at worst.

And St. Paul cautions his new converts (full of enthusiasm), “Do not expect a quick fix, an instant solution” and so he writes, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up”.

Violated expectations! In his book “The Perennial Philadelphia”, Nathaniel Burt writes, “It is almost impossible not to have a convivial good time among Philadelphians, so long as you don’t expect too much in the way of stimulation”.

Friends, what do you and I do with “violated expectations”? How does being a friend of God make a difference in this often painful and traumatic life experience?

We know that there are those who adversely criticize the church for their experience has proved the church to be less than perfect, less than loving, less than welcoming – but how foolish are such critics. It is as inane to damn the church for being less than perfect as it is to damn a doctor’s waiting room for housing sick people. For this is where sinners come, is it not?

Some foolish naïve clergy look for perfect congregations – oh dear! And they pout a little when their “expectation are violated”.

And there are some foolish naïve congregations who look for perfect clergy – oh dear! And they too pout a little when their “expectations are violated”.

Some of us have ridiculously unwise and unmerited expectations that “everybody is our friend” – and when these expectations are inevitably violated, it is all too easy to become angry and resentful.

There are some in committed relationships who expect their partner to be “always there”, always giving and they expect any differences in their relationship to be resolved almost instantaneously – and when these expectations are inevitably violated, it is all too easy to become angry and resentful.

For a while Naaman forgot the humble beginnings of his quest for healing... hear these words, “a young girl captive from the land of Israel, she who served Naaman’s wife”... this one, it seems, initiates the whole process of healing for Naaman.

The Galatian Christians were not to forget their humble beginnings... enslaved by sin, tyrannized by evil and then set free by the word of the man who once had persecuted Christians to death.

And the disciples... well, they set off with “no purse, no bag, no sandals” and these humble beginnings were to establish in them a dependence upon God and a trusting faith in His goodness.

In the 1991 comedy “City Slickers”, the late Jack Palance plays a grizzled cowboy Curly. Billy Crystal plays Mitch, a middle-aged salesman looking to renew his life.

This is the dialogue toward the end of the film as they both ride together –

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is?

Curly: This. [holds up one finger]

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean s***.

Mitch: But what is the "one thing?"

Curly: [smiles] That's what you have to find out.

Naaman found out that the one thing that mattered the most was his healing, salvation, wholeness and all else, all other hopes, had better take a second place behind that “one thing”.

For Paul, it was the “Cross of Christ”, and for the disciples it was not the power to vanquish evil and see great things happen, it was this one thing “that their names were written in heaven’s book of life”.

What today is the one thing for which you hope, on which you place and assess and shape all your expectations? This is important stuff for it has been said that peace is only possible for us when we let go of expectations.

Let us bring that one thing either in confession or in thanksgiving to God... for He is here and He will change our lives, if only we ask Him as fully as we can.

AMEN

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