

“Discovering Godly Expectations”

Matthew 16:21-26 & Romans 12:2, 9-19a, 20-21

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Prayer for Understanding Startle us, O God with your truth. Open our hearts to your word. Amen

Often it is frustrating when one's expectations do not align with reality. Our scripture today continues a multi-chapter contrast in Matthew between God's will for us and human expectations. The religious leader's expectation was for Jesus to be an enforcer of the law, an advocate for institutional religion, a supporter of their ministry, an enforcer of purity. Instead, Jesus is gracious, welcomes everyone, and is establishing inclusive, all belong, community. The disciple's expectation was powerful, honoring, appreciated greatness by their following of Jesus. Instead, Jesus taught that greatness is being humble like a child and being a servant of everyone. Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus affirmed Peter for this observation and declared Peter a rock upon which God's church will be built. Peter's expectation of the Messiah is a religious and political leader who will take charge, rise to complete power, and enforce God's will. Instead, Jesus explains that as Messiah he will suffer, be beaten, denied, mocked, condemned, and crucified. Jesus the Messiah will freely give up life to be resurrected, so Jesus can give life to everyone. Peter's expectation is being a loving disciple will be gratifying, making quick transformation of everyone to be loving and quick transformation of earth to be like heaven. Jesus explains being a loving disciple is challenging, much will go wrong, disciples will suffer, be rejected, and oppressed. The promised coming transformation of all people being loving and living in harmonious community will be agonizingly slow. The transformation of earth becoming like heaven will take a long time. The contrast between human expectation and God's will is why Jesus keeps telling the disciples to not attempt to explain Jesus; because until they have seen Jesus crucified and risen, their understanding of Jesus is far from reality.

Moments earlier Peter has declared Jesus the Messiah. Jesus has declared Peter and those who perceive God's love to be living rocks that are being cemented together in love building a spiritual house. Peter is envisioning a grand spiritual house that is a safe sanctuary.

The good news of Matthew: **Matthew 16:21-26 NLT** “From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead. But Peter took Jesus aside and began to reprimand Jesus for saying such things. “Heaven forbid, Lord,” Peter said. “This will never happen to you!” Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?”

On earth, in this in between time, when the glory of heaven is not yet fully manifested, life is hard, at times brutal, sometimes our attempts to love will be condemned by those with power. Followers of Jesus are to be willing to give up all control, to give up their life for the sake of loving service. Followers of Jesus are to take up their cross, some quest that will expand the love of the cosmos. It is a paradox in giving up everything, including our life, one gains everything and everlasting life. One needs to let go of their false self to let come their true self. Today in the United States, none of us will probably physically die by loving like Jesus; however, there are plenty of forms of death that are painful that will yield glorious life. These are all contrasts between human expectations and God's will. The death of “human self-serving” to yield resurrection “self-giving”. The death of “saving one's self” to yield resurrection “saving of everyone”. The death of “how can I protect myself, my stuff” to yield resurrection of “sharing, giving and serving” so all can universally flourish. The death of “how can I receive glory” to yield the resurrection of “everyone enjoying glory”. The death of “living self-centered” to yield the resurrection of “living God centered”. And many more ways, for as our scripture teaches, we do not understand most of the ways dying will propel us through thresholds to abundant life. We are unable to comprehend the mystery of how partaking of the Lord's supper, a meal that puts us on a journey through

death will nourish us with resurrection eternal life beyond our grandest dreams. Since our resurrection is guaranteed, we are invited to live life to the fullest by taking risks to love extravagantly. It is a paradox by endangering yourself by extending grace you will discover your true identity.

Since God has made death a portal to everlasting life, we with Godly expectations will be set free of all fear. No one can take your life from you, or diminish your life, if you have decided to lovingly give your life away. Inclusive love for everyone means narrow-minded ways will die to reveal ways beyond your grandest hopes. This way of dying is hard and the eternal glory love yields is infinitely worth the cost. This way is difficult, complicated, and frustrating, because we cannot comprehend most of the ways taking up a cross is the way to resurrection.

Thomas Kempis wrote, "In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is excellence of virtue; in the Cross is perfection of holiness. There is no salvation of soul, nor hope of eternal life, save in the Cross. If you bear the cross gladly, it will bear you."

Jesus taught we are to give up our own way to practice self-denial. We live in an egocentric culture with a focus on me, my needs, and my wants. Me first is great for capitalism, advertising, social media, fake news, divisive politics, and putting our own interest ahead of others. This is a reason conflicts arise, why we often do not get along, and why there are disagreements, hurt feelings, feuds, and broken relationships. Me first explains in part why two people can get into a fight over a parking space and why they seethe in anger when someone merges in front of them.

Homiletics laments: "We live in a country called "Me." We have Me rules, Me goals, Me dreams, Me plans, Me money, Me toys and Me gadgets. When people, and the behavior of people, disrupt life in "Me," "me" gets upset. Because it is all about "me." It is not about you. It is not about your needs, your feelings, your dreams and goals. It is about me. Jesus turns this upside down. If we want to be disciples, we must change countries. We must live in the country of "You." You come first. Your needs are paramount. We live to make certain that You are cared for, that You are honored and respected and that You are whole and healthy in every way. This is what a follower of Jesus does. They deny their citizenship in Me, and embraces a world in which You is the center. It is an other-centric culture instead of an egocentric one. They deny themselves and do things the Jesus way, which is the way of self-sacrificing agape love." The apostle Paul acknowledged this necessity: **1 Corinthians 15:30 "I die every day,"** Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Every day, a death, a denial. "When Christ calls a person, God bids them come and die," wrote German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Jesus said: **"Those who lose their life for my sake will find it,"** Jesus knew that, although he was going to Jerusalem to die an awful, agonizing death, beyond the cross is resurrection. When we deny ourselves, which is difficult, we will find joy and real living ensue. A life of self-denial is an intensely meaningful life. Saint Francis wrote: "For it is in dying to self, that we are born to eternal life."

Find a cross and pick it up. Do you have a hard time loving and befriending a certain person? Love them and befriend them. Is it hard for you to generously give so that your financial resources will bless others? Then double your annual giving! Is it hard for you to **"bless those who persecute you, and say all manner of things against you"**? Then write a note of encouragement naming something good you see in them and give it to them. Do you want to win every argument, to prove yourself right? Then actively listen and speak only about the areas of shared agreement. Are you harming a relationship by drudging up perceived wrongs from the past? Then let all of that go, live in the present and explore how you can love them in the ways they want to be loved. Do you want the organizations, clubs, and church you participate in to thrive? Then have no concern about the future of your groups, love others, and join them in what they love doing. Do you want your ways to be enjoyed by everyone? Then befriend someone who sees things differently than you. That is picking up a cross. That is active discipleship. Name aspects of love that you struggle to live. Find a cross, an active way to live the love that you struggle to enjoy.

The Apostle Paul tries to explain the way of dying to find life, taking up crosses to discover purpose, "letting go" of human expectations to "let come" God's expectations. **Romans 12:2, 9-19a, 20-21 NLT "Do not copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Do not just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to**

what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Do not curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Do not be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And do not think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will surprise them with goodness." Do not let evil conquer you but conquer evil by doing good.

Our minds tend to default to our basic understanding of our world. Without God's insights we rationalize, judge, and divide. Paul gives us a list of things we can do to transform our thinking from human-centered to centering on God's way of loving everyone: **"let love be genuine", "persevere in prayer", "be hospitable to strangers", "live peaceably with all", "if your enemies are hungry, feed them", "overcome evil with good"**. Life is really hard. And we can love. And God will get us to resurrection. Amen

