

How it is and how it is supposed to be

Menno Mennonite Church
August 25, 2020

Purpose: To address anxiety about the future and our visions for it.

Message: Our visions of what is to come must always come through and by the spirit, being informed by God's creative force.

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-17, 21-26

Synopsis: One of the most enduring mental images we possess is the image that we maintain about how things *should* be. From little up, we have this image born in our minds about the ways in which the world ought to work. When that image is disappointed, as it often is, it can be a substantial grief for us to wrap our heads around. We are so sure that our image of the world is the image that a just God would bring about. We are called to hold loosely our image of the world as it should be, instead choosing to see the creative spirit within all things, anticipating more what God is doing in our midst than what ought to happen if we had our own way.

*Quote to consider: "To love is to bear with the chaos...to recognize there the unformed future."
And to recognize the Spirit hovering over the mess...*

(Mat 16:13-17, 21-26 NRS) ¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,¹ the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Matthew 16:13-17, 21-26 NRS

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,
he asked his disciples,
"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said,
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but others Elijah,
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

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16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,
the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus answered him,
"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,
but my Father in heaven.

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Jesus began to show his disciples
that he must go to Jerusalem
and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders
and chief priests and scribes, and be killed,
and on the third day be raised.

22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying,
"God forbid it, Lord!
This must never happen to you."

23 But he turned and said to Peter,
"Get behind me, Tempter!
You are a stumbling block to me;
for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

24 Then Jesus told his disciples,
"If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

25 For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

26 For what will it profit them
if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?
Or what will they give in return for their life?

I wonder; what did you have in mind for this season? To borrow the infamous job interview question, where 5 years ago did you imagine yourself today. Laying aside the various extraordinary circumstances of the current virus conditions—because no one expected that, and we can only commiserate for so long over that which is well outside our control—how are things shaping up to your expectations? I wonder what your plans might be for 5 years yet further on? Now that I have you thinking forward and back, let me tell you why I take you here at all. I come here because it speaks to our expectations. We all carry expectations. Big, small, coming from within or decidedly from outside of ourselves, we often live our lives in two worlds. The world as we think it should be and imagine it to be; and the world how it really is. We have notions of how the world should be, how our lives should be lived, and sometimes those can be tricky to square with the lives we find. I am guessing that as I asked the questions I did just a minute ago, few of you had identic images of your mind of exactly this divide. And that is absolutely OK. It happens to all of us and is perfectly natural even if it often uncomfortable. When I set to imagining my life, I would not have predicted where I am today living in a strange time in strange circumstances and all the rest. I didn't imagine myself a father of young kids at this relatively late age. Come to that, I didn't particularly imagine myself standing here doing this task of preaching the word at all, let alone approaching 14 years of doing so. I am guessing there are things big and small that you can list that fall in very similar veins.

Not that this is bad. There is nothing wrong with that. If our childhood dreaming would prove universally accurate, there would be a whole lot more astronauts all around, whether or not we had any use for them. I do not see the separations between the life that I have lived and the expectations I had for that life as a problem. I would not change my world if I could—with the obvious exception of hurrying some red tape along but that's about it. And I am guessing that many of you would say the same. Finding ourselves where we are is a blessing. Yet, sometimes the greatest wounds that we carry in this world are not necessarily those resulting from that which has happened to us, but rather the grief that comes from seeing our expectations go unfulfilled, that which didn't come to pass, either whole or in part.

We know this because our expectations have power. They shape our reality. There is a reason why a placebo properly spoken to can have some of the same healing properties as a real drug. There was an experiment a while back comparing people playing video games. One time through the game, the players were by themselves, the second they had a cheering crowd

encouraging them. Ironically, it was when the players had the cheering crowds that they did the most poorly. It proved more challenging to perform while satisfying the expectations of those around them, playing more conservatively and less fluidly than they otherwise would, not wanting to disappoint. We are driven by our expectations, but if we are not careful they can come back and bite us just as easily.

I offer all of this because it is this set of diverging expectations that our disciples are dealing with today. On the surface they get the thing right—they figure out the identity of the Lord and answer properly: “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the one God.” You can see Peter and the disciples giving each other high fives for their intuition and spiritual insight. Having reached that conclusion now for the first time out loud at least their mind must have been flooded with the expectations of what comes next—of the conquering hero, the beloved of YHWH sent to put things right and restore Israel before their eyes. And here he is. The cries of slaves in Egypt, the yearnings of exiles in Babylon, the prayers of Roman subjects: these are all being heard by God and summed up in Jesus. God’s anointed will respond in a way that will transform the world and set things right. Jesus is here to set things right.

But it does not last. Almost immediately Jesus sets about dismantling the castles in the sky that they have begun to construct for themselves. They have called him Messiah; and the Messiah turns around and quashes their very concept of what that even meant. The Messiah is supposed to be the anointed one, the one who perfects the world and calls the forces of good to the fore, justifying all of Israel and its sorry, sad history. And here is Jesus saying that the way that God has set out for him is the one that was all too familiar for the prophets—rejection, ridicule, and suffering. We can almost see the other disciples huddling behind Peter as he takes his turn to ask Jesus if he could possibly be serious. “surely not this Lord. You just said that you were the messiah. And now this? It just does not hold together.

The expectations of hundreds of years and every Hebrew school story about who and what the Messiah was to be was coming crashing down around their ears, and they were trying to figure out how to manage this massive disappointment between the world as it is and the world as it should be. They expected a victory. They expected liberation. They expected real, tangible political power, so much so that they were already planning the place settings. But their expectations were bound by their imaginations of the ways and means of this world, and struggled to take in the possibility that there could be power in weakness, liberation in bondage,

and victory even in the grave. They got the question of who am I right, but had no idea what that meant. Their expectations would not allow them to see that far.

How common that really is. Our imaginations are often a function only of what we can imagine, and all that we can imagine is what we can see before us. We, like the disciples before us, bring our expectations to God. Spoken or not there is that which we just assume comes with the general God package; That if we are generally good people, generally good things happen to us; that there is a correlations between those that we don't like and those that God may well condemn; that God acts to minimize pain for those who in the club of the beloved of God. We expect that as we have a messiah, that this means that the world changes as we would have it change. Even though we know full well that this is not how God works, it does not mean that we don't hope it might turn out that way.

As important as declaring Jesus as Messiah may be, more important still is remaining open to having our notions of what that role looks like challenged from time to time. Speaking those words will require that our expectations and hopes be transformed. We learn that it is not enough to dream of a world transformed under the narrow set of parameters out of which we all tend to operate—of power and practical organization. Instead, the Kingdom world will require that our imaginations expand beyond the simple math of power and influence and be opened to the to the far greater vision of a world made new time and time again not by the stroke of the mighty arm, but instead by the persistence, sometimes painful way of unending, undying love. The world is remade by the notion of Jesus Christ is Lord, and that includes the ways that we expect the world to work, and the messiah to function.

If we take Jesus at his word of how things work in the world, more likely than not our future may not end up being our own. If we ask that most dangerous of question, “where is God in all of this” we will likely be surprised by the answer. I am often impressed by the uncanny sense of humor that God has of taking what we want and making it just that much different to change everything along the way. The discipline of balancing our expectations with God's possibilities asks us to do two very specific things. First, we are asked to hold loosely on to that which we might well want most, being prepared for the possibility that what we intend in the world may not, ultimately, be how God intends it to be. This is a difficult thing to wrap our heads around. Sometimes we have to struggle for a long time to see God in that which we do not expect. It can take years just working aligning our deep hopes with how God might bring them

into being. It is not that God automatically wants something different than what we want and we should simply sit around and be listless with a “Lord Willing” behind every plan we make, but we need to leave enough room in our expectations to see the way that the creative God might use our hopes in surprising ways.

Secondly, we do well to change what we mean when we talk about expectation. Often, the expectations we have of ourselves can hold us hostage to our own dreams and desires. We can become so fixated on how things ought to be, or preoccupied with what we perceive others demanding of us that we cannot fathom that a new way might be afoot. When our expectations hold us prisoner to what must be to the point that we cannot accept what is, we must let them go of those expectations. Grieve them yes—of course. But let them go so that we can open ourselves to the world as it is and the gifts that are ours in the here and now. For if we don’t, we fall short of the full liberty given us in God’s good world and God’s good plan, and can make ourselves miserable by the disappointment of what is near to us.

Try though we might, our lives are held in the hands of God, and God’s thoughts are not always our thoughts; our dreams God’s dreams. We must value our dreams and anticipations, yes, but not so much that they blind us to the dynamic world that God is creating all around us. We might have our world shaken, and end up going where we least expect, as the disciples before us always have. We do well to see the chaos in our lives with the eyes of love, seeing there the unformed future waiting to be, and trusting the creative spirit to be hovering over the mess ready to call light into being.

May we find new ways to be called even beyond what we expect of the world as it should be and be given eyes to see the beauty of the world as it is, even in the midst of the messy way of life as we find it.