

FULL OF EXPECTATIONS

I am not a theological thief. I don't believe in stealing sheep. If a person is securely rooted in a non-Christian faith tradition, I am perfectly comfortable with that. It is one of my core beliefs that there are indeed many ways one can be relationship with the Divine. God is no respecter of denominational boundaries, or religious borders. Buddhist, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews can all be as powerfully connected to the Holy as the best of Christians. I don't hold to the idea that the only way to be saved is to affirm a faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I am firmly rooted in my conviction that for me Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But that does not mean you must be as well. That said, if someone is openly seeking a new path, if someone feels drawn to the Jesus, I am most certainly willing to help guide them along the way.

A number of years ago a new family started worshipping with my congregation in New Jersey. Like many others in the area, they were Koreans who had immigrated to America. He had no real interest in matters religious, but his wife, let's call her Sun-Hee, did. She had been brought up as a Buddhist. But as an adult, after a time of spiritual wandering, she felt the need to learn more about Jesus and the Christian faith. So, I began working with her helping her to examine her hopes and understandings. Once a week or so she would come to my office, and we'd explore some of the basic issues of faith. And in time she determined she wanted to make a commitment to being a follower of the Man of Nazareth.

I shan't forget the day Sun Hee came into my office to tell me of her decision. She was dressed very formally, and in her hands, she carried a beautiful plate of fruit. Large, exquisite grapes, sat atop a variety of other fruits: berries, oranges, tiny, exotic bananas. I must have looked rather surprised because she quickly provided an explanation. "In my tradition," she said, "an offering of fruit is made to your spiritual mentor." I was touched, if not a bit uncomfortable with the word offering. I certainly am no god! But I had been a guide, and so I received her gift with genuine gratitude. And then as we sat, listened as she explained how she had come to her decision, and the request she was about to make. "I'd like to be baptized," she told me. "I'd like to publicly declare my new faith."

In our tradition adult baptisms are rare. Most folks in our denomination are baptized as infants, and then make a public declaration of faith at confirmation. Make no mistake, infant baptism is a powerful expression of faith--or at least it can be. But it is an expression of parental faith. Each and every vow made by parents as they bring their children to the baptismal font, speaks of their own commitment to the way of Jesus, their willingness to

bring up the child in the faith, and their hope and expectation that the little one will indeed grow into a relationship with God.

But adult baptism, that's another matter. Sun-Hee would be standing before the church, declaring her belief that the way of Jesus, was the right path for her to travel. She would, in the words of our baptismal ceremony, promise "by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of the Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best [as she was] able." (*UCC Book of Worship*, 139)

And so, she did. And after she made her promises, after the congregation promised their love, support, and care for her as she embarked on this new leg of her journey, I scooped up a handful of water from the font and trickled it over her head even as tears trickled down her cheeks and mine as well. And intoning a modern variation of the age-old formula, I spoke the words of baptism. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all."

Sun Hee moved soon after that, and I've lost track of her in the ensuing years. But I think of her each time I baptize an infant, for while infant baptism in in many, many ways is about the expectations of parents, Sun Hee's baptism was about her own expectation, her own expectation that with Jesus as her guide, her Lord, her Savior, she would be better able to navigate the road ahead of her. I can only hope and pray that that expectation has been met by reality, and that for Sun Hee her expectation has had a positive effect on her life.

Our passage from Luke, about the baptism of Jesus, begins by speaking of expectations. "As the people were filled with expectation," writes Luke. Expectation that the Messiah would soon appear and save them from the oppression exerted over their nation by the Romans. As one scholar writes, "The Hebrews expected a Messiah to come and save them from destruction, leading the nation into a new political and religious future." (*Linda Bridges, Feasting on the Word, C4: 237*) They hoped for a Messiah who would be a great military and political leader, one who would lead the way out of the slavery they experienced under Caesar and his lieutenants, and into a better life of freedom.

John the Baptizer often spoke in language that seemed to promise just such a messiah. His words seemed to foreshadow one who would come and drive out the enemy with a vengeance. Using an agricultural metaphor, he spoke of a messiah who would be like a farmer threshing his wheat, separating the good grain from the worthless chaff. Chaff that would be burned "with unquenchable fire." (3:17c) Imagine a Messiah marching through ancient Israel, driving out the Romans, burning down their barracks. Like a first century version of Sherman marching through Atlanta, or Patton leading his tanks across Europe.

But then along comes Jesus, patiently waiting at the end of the line to be baptized. Really! That's what the text says, "Now when all the people had been baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized," writes Luke. Trust me Sherman didn't wait in the back of any lines. Neither did Patton. No wonder folks are a bit confused when some begin to speak of Jesus as Messiah. He doesn't measure up to their expectations. Not at all. He speaks about loving your neighbor. His closest companions are simple fishermen and a cadre of women. He consorts with tax collectors, for crying out loud. The ultimate dupes of the Roman Empire! He even heals the servant of a Roman centurion. Talk about give aid and comfort to the enemy! And later when he's arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and one of his disciples pulls out a sword to defend him, cutting off one of the slaves of the soldiers who came to take him in, Jesus tells him to put down his weapon. Indeed, some are so caught up in the expectations of what a messiah might look like, what a messiah might do, who a messiah might be, they don't recognize Jesus for who he really is.

Sometimes expectations can be a source of hope and strength, as I believe they were for Sun Hee. Sometimes they can bolster our faith and give us courage to move forward even when life is filled with obstacles. Like a teacher, who expects the failing child to do better, to be a better student, and then gives them support to match that expectation. But sometimes expectations can get in the way of our seeing things in a new way.

When an infant is baptized, his or her parents may come to the font full of expectations for their child. And that is all well and good. For a parent to think positively about their son or daughter's future is a good thing. But sometimes expectations get in the way. How many moms have expected their child to grow up to be a doctor, and then been disappointed and disapproving when she or he declares they want to be a musician or a plumber or a bank teller? How many parents have envisioned a traditional heterosexual wedding for their little one, only to be angry when their child has announced they are gay or lesbian or trans?

Expectations can be empowering, but they can also ruin relationships, they can even ruin lives!

Perhaps we can learn from God's response when Jesus comes up out of the Jordan after his baptism. A voice comes from heaven, we are told, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." (3:22b)

Maybe that's what a child most longs to hear, most needs to hear. Not a long list of expectations, but rather an affirming expression of love and support. Will there be rules? Of course. Will there be hopes and dreams? Naturally. But first and foremost a child needs to know they are beloved. That their mere existence is a source of pleasure and joy. Perhaps that's what all of us need. Perhaps we all need to be reminded again and again, even as Sun

Hee was, even as Jesus himself was. You and I are all beloved children of God. And while God, no doubt, has hopes and dreams, expectations and even rules, if you will, for us to follow, none of that will ever get in the way of God seeing the real you. And realized or not, no expectations will ever lose or gain God's everlasting love for you.

Amen

John H. Danner