
Grate Expectations
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16

In the opening of the 2002 movie *About Schmidt*, Warren Schmidt - the central character of the story - is about to retire from his lifelong job in insurance. The movie opens with him sitting at his desk beside a pile of packed boxes, watching the clock tick away - second by second - towards 5 o'clock, at which point he leaves his office for the last time ever. While he waits, he looks disappointed. As the movie unfolds, we come to see that his disappointment is based on his expectations about retirement.

Warren's wife, Helen, has forced the purchase of an RV, and Warren expects - but is not looking forward to - spending a lot of time on the road. Warren's daughter has met her soul-mate, so Warren expects - but is not looking forward to - her wedding which is in the final planning stages. At Warren's retirement party, his replacement speaks highly of Warren, and hints that he may need to consult with Warren from time to time, but Warren is worried about feeling needed without having a job to go to.

But life rarely unfolds as expected. When Warren drops by the office after his retirement, not only is the "new guy" *not* interested in any help Warren has to offer, but on his way out of the building Warren sees his carefully packed boxes and files - the symbol of his entire career - in the garbage, unopened. Shortly after his retirement party, Warren's wife, Helen, dies. In his grief, Warren spends time with Helen's personal effects, and discovers letters that reveal that years earlier, Helen had had an affair with Warren's best friend. And when Warren's daughter and her fiancé come for Helen's funeral, Warren confirms for himself his worst fears that his daughter could have done "a lot better" in finding a mate.

So in the early parts of the movie, Warren's goes from a very predictable life to a life of great uncertainty. Warren loses his job, then his wife, then his best friend. About all that he has to look forward to is an increasing sense of separation between himself and his daughter as she gets married to someone that he strongly disapproves of.

I wonder if that's how the Hebrew people felt in our story today. The entire story of the exodus highlights that the Hebrews were leaving slavery, but they were leaving many other things too - they were leaving a known world behind. A world where they had food. A world where they had occupations that gave their lives meaning. A world where they had homes, friends, and all of the normal things that make up life. A world where they knew what to do when they woke up each morning. Like in Warren's story, perhaps they were not in love with every aspect of their former life, but it was *their* life, and that gave a sense of comfort.

In today's reading, there is a particular focus on the idea that in Egypt, the Hebrews had plenty of food, in contrast to wherever they are wandering now, where the people are starving. In the story, God provides food for the people but they don't see it. They don't understand it. They don't recognize that what they see - the fine flaky substance - was in fact food. In the story, Moses has to tell the people "it's food".

Sometimes, what we need is right in front of us, but we don't recognize it. But to be fair, sometimes it is hard to recognize something that we are not expecting to see.

And our gospel reading today also provides us with a great example of this. At least for me it does. The story just seems so wrong. It goes against almost everything I was raised to believe. Jesus shares a view of the Kingdom of God as a place where all workers get the same pay - regardless of how long they worked. Regardless of whether they worked through the heat of the day. What happened to "the early bird gets the worm"? What about the American proverb that says, "Success is a ladder you cannot climb with your hands in your pockets"? What about the adage, "The only thing that comes to us without effort is old age"? Or this one - The only place that "success" comes before "work" in the dictionary. And - my personal favourite - "The difference between 'try' and 'triumph' is a little 'umph'."

We expect to work for things. And - We expect that we are rewarded for those efforts. So - where does Jesus get the idea that all the workers - those who worked all day and those who worked a few minutes - should be payed the same. To our modern ears this story just seems to be let's be honest ... it seems unfair. Even in the Exodus

story, God provides food for all, the workers, the dreamers, and the slackers. Is that fair? This is *not* what I signed up for in life!

That's why I titled this sermon "Grate Expectations". No - that's not my computer acting up again. I meant "grate" as in expectations that grates on us. Expectations that grate when compared to the reality we face. But when our expectations of life - and actual life - clash - which often happens, what should we do about it? I ask that because when life doesn't measure up for us, there are clearly 2 possibilities. Either life just isn't working out for us - which is what we usually assume - or else our own expectations are just not helpful to us. It may not even be that a particular expectation is unhelpful. Some people feel that having expectations at all is unhelpful. "MaryAnn" of simplemarriage.net says, "A good working definition of expectations is planned disappointment. ... When what we expect to happen does not happen, we are disappointed and we suffer pain at some level. ... Ironically, we are also likely to be unhappy even when our expectations ARE met!"¹ That's because we are not overly happy when good things happen - if we expect them. To feel truly grateful, we usually need something good to happen that we do not expect. "Gratitude is the key to happiness and anything that undermines gratitude must undermine happiness. And nothing undermines gratitude as much as expectations. The more expectations you have, the less gratitude you will have."²

And what about us. What about our expectations. Are our own expectations helpful to us? Perhaps we feel like we are wandering, like Warren, or like the Hebrews? That we have left a situation where we at least knew what to expect? I still have a lot to learn about the history of this congregation, but I already know that we have a collective memory about a time when we had a larger congregation, a larger choir, a large Sunday school that didn't even fit in the building! Many of us here can look back to a time when life was different, and perhaps we even long for that life. In the words of Chilean writer Michaela Bruzzes, "Like the Israelites, our faith often gives way and we find ourselves longing for the comfort and security of spiritual slavery, someone telling us what is right

¹ <https://simplemarriage.net/expectations-equal-unhappiness/>

² Ibid.

and wrong, what to do, where to go. We long for a 'Santa Claus God' who will allow us to remain spiritually passive and dependent, not a God who demands our input and active effort to maintain the covenant.”

If we are expecting things to turn back into the “good old days”, that expectation is not helpful. But Jesus calls us to something better. Something deeper. Jesus calls us to a Kingdom where we are happy to all be paid the same - because we are all paid enough. A living wage - and I mean that in every sense - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A Kingdom where we all share and have enough. A real community of love, caring, and compassion. We are called to a higher vision than simply having full pews.

Like Warren and the Hebrews, If we compare our situation today to our past, we might long for our past. But what if we give up that expectation and work on our own gratitude. What if we stopped comparing our reality to some mythical point in our past and embrace the joys - the sustenance of life - that is right in front of our own eyes. Moses said, “It’s food”. I say to you, “It’s new life”.

In *About Schmidt*, by the end of the movie we realize that in the process of losing everything that was important to him - Warren finds something new that he cares about. When he is casually channel-surfing he comes upon an advertisement for an agency that helps support children overseas - similar to World Vision. He sponsors a single child before Helen dies. And he writes to the child, Ndugu, throughout the movie. And Ndugu sends Warren a note, and a picture, of love, and of new life.

God provides. But God does not always provide what we expect. Let us look - together - with fresh eyes. We will find many things, but at a minimum, look for the gift of gratitude in our own hearts.

Amen.