
Living faithfully with ... disappointment
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2 and John 6:35, 41-51

Living faithfully would be so simple - if the world just co-operated, don't you think? I mean, if the world was reasonable. If the world was fair. If your golden years were truly golden. If everyone liked you the way they really should. If other people just acted properly. If life was perfect, I would have no problem living a faithful life. Have you ever caught yourself thinking like that? If so, you are not alone. Many people think they could live more faithful lives if life was just a bit more faithful to them first.

But before we go there. Do you know the #1 cause of unhappiness? According to researchers, the #1 cause of unhappiness is our own expectations. Like expecting the world to be reasonable, expecting life to be fair, expecting that your golden years would be nothing but golden, expecting that everyone would like you just the way you are, expecting that life should be perfect.

We often feel that we know exactly what we want, and we know that what we want is reasonable and possible, so what's the big problem? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but after spending many years listening to lots of different people, on balance I think that most people have no idea what they really want, and moreover couldn't care less if what they want is reasonable or possible.

Like the person who asks the guru - "Guru, I throw a stone up - why is it landing on my head?" And the guru says, "that's how life works on this planet". Sometimes we get exactly what we should expect, but that doesn't mean we won't complain about it.

Some people say that the most common cause of disappointment is having unrealistic expectations. Well that sounds simple. Surely rational people like us could reflect on our lives and eliminate any unrealistic expectations we have. But the idea that humans like us can weed out our unrealistic expectations is actually an example of an unrealistic expectation. We are programmed to hope. It is perhaps our greatest gift. But our hopeful nature pretty much guarantees that we have a great deal of capacity for

holding unrealistic expectations. So our ability to hope leads to some of our disappointment. OK - that sounds simplistic. But to the extent that is actually true - how many of us would rather have hopes that sometimes disappoint us, and how many of us would rather have no hope at all? I'll take the hope with disappointment please!

Filmmaker Michael Moore spoke about hope this week. He said. “[Forget] hope. Seriously, [forget] hope. [Forget] despair too, but forget hope.” Moore explains his statement, “Hope is passive. Hope gives you permission to let someone else do the work. We don’t need hope. We need action.” We will find out what that means when his next movie comes out on Sept 21, but I certainly agree that hope is sometimes hopeful, and sometimes it is really just wishful thinking, which is not helpful, and not really hopeful either.

And in our gospel today, we have a story about unmet expectations. Jesus says he is the bread of life come down from heaven, and the people from his own village - who saw him when he was born, saw him grow up, saw him playing, running around, doing whatever kids normally do, just can’t wrap their minds around it. What do you think? If you were an adult living in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, and you recall Jesus as a child stealing figs from your fig tree, how would you respond when Jesus - now an adult himself - said he was bread come down from heaven. What do you think it would take for you to change your own perspective on Jesus? What do you think it would take for you to change your own expectations of Jesus?

[ask: what is disappointment?]

You might say that disappointment is the discrepancy between how your life has unfolded and your expectations for life. But I think there is a piece missing from that idea. I want to share a story with you.

This story comes from a congregation - which may or may not have been this one. Over the years, I’ve visited with a number of people in a variety of hospitals. There was a short period of time when I was visiting with 2 people, both at the same hospital. These 2 people had a lot in common. They both had about the same medical conditions. They

were on the same floor and were in similar rooms. They both had about the same amount of family support - each of them had 1 child who lived very close by and another child further away, but still in the GTA. They both had about the same number of family visits every week. They both got the same number of visits from me. They both were on about the same medical trajectory, in terms of tests, pains, discomforts, prognoses, etc.

But the visits I had with these 2 individuals were as different as night and day. One person was always complaining about something. The staff. Their own families. The food. My conversations with them focused on their immediate medical situation, upcoming tests, etc. And trust me, there were lots of valid things to complain about. But the person's view was very small, focused mainly on their own pathetic situation - which was in some ways pathetic. They had in some ways already stopped living, and were focused almost completely down to their immediate medical challenges.

The other person was a delight to visit with. They had a big view of the world and were always interested in how other people were doing. They were very interested in what was going on at the church and felt they were missing out on fun activities. They expressed deep love for their families and expressed lots of appreciation for the time family members took to make visits. They expressed appreciation for my visits. They asked about my family. They kept up on local news pretty well. They were still living their lives - in spite of their many medical challenges.

What I learned from those 2 people is that disappointment is not simply the discrepancy between how your life has unfolded compared to your dreams. Disappointment is caused by the discrepancy between how you view your own life and your dreams. Your view of your own life - which is entirely up to you - is a key element that is perhaps more important than the actual "reality" of your own life. Those 2 people had - more or less - the same reality, but their views, their perceptions, their attitudes, were radically different.

I learned something from visiting with the families of those 2 people too. The person who complained in hospital had actually complained for their whole life, even prior to any medical conditions. The person who could appreciate life even in hospital had actually appreciated life for their whole life. Perhaps how we view reality is more

important than actual reality when we want to understand disappointment. As one mystic put it, “spirituality and our sense of self has nothing to do with the atmosphere you live in. It’s about the atmosphere you create within yourself.” We - like it or not - are in charge of our own perceptions and our own expectations.

And how do we even understand our own expectations? According to some mystics - like Sadhguru - we don’t even have our own expectations. We simply copy expectations from other people, our neighbours, people we think are successful, social pressures, cultural norms. Perhaps that’s why, even though we are all individuals, we share some common expectations.

For some reason I was thinking about our expectations around relationships this week. It’s possible that officiating at a wedding yesterday, and at another one later today, had something to do with that. Or perhaps it’s because when you are looking for examples of unrealistic expectations, relationships and marriage quickly come to the top of the heap. We have all been damaged by unrealistic expectations of relationships in movies and on TV. Who can forget the classic, “love is never having to say you are sorry” from Hollywood (and other places) instead of the more sensible, “love means you would not hesitate to express an apology when you need to.”

For example, in relationships, it is very common for people to hold 3 expectations of that relationship. Firstly, that our partner should be able to read our minds. Secondly, that my own love should be unconditional. Thirdly, that being involved in a significant, long-term relationship shouldn’t take any effort on our part. In truth, our partners cannot read our minds. Love should not be unconditional in that a breach of trust should be at least possible, and real relationships actually take effort. It’s a bit silly when we think about it. Many people make more effort learning to drive a car than they put into building good, solid, relationships, and then we wonder why those relationships fail. “Guru, I throw a stone up - why is it landing on my head?”

So - just like last week - I find myself finding it hard to circle back to scripture on the topic at hand - living faithfully with disappointment. Because the classic Christian message - included in our gospel today too - is don’t worry about your problems, you’ll be fine once you get to heaven. Which implies we should not expect happiness in this

life. But I find that conclusion a bit ... disappointing. I think I prefer the conclusion from what I learned in hospital. That our outlook and attitude has more impact on our own happiness than actual reality. Again this week - I couldn't find any "1-liners" that directly deal with living with disappointment. But the larger message of Jesus is I think helpful.

Jesus - on the cross, did not complain, or say that he was treated unfairly. He expressed sorrow for the lack of vision of his tormentors, and asked God to forgive the people who were torturing him at the time. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." The secret to living with our own disappointment is to live a big life, think about other people and their needs, as well as your own. Choose to see the value of life. Choose to see the value in life. Forgive others. If we can do that, we won't have time to be disappointed.

Amen.