

“God’s Expectations”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Romans 12: 9-21

What are your expectations when you walk through those doors on a Sunday morning? Smiling faces welcoming you at the entrance? A bulletin which has helpful, had timely information about the church’s life, as well as no mistakes? Music which inspires you, prayer which touches you, a few light moments of laughter, but also some solemn, peaceful moments? A sermon which brings you face-to-face with the God we find in Holy Scripture, which stretches you a bit but doesn’t stretch you too much? All of this done within the confines of sixty minutes, if not a little less? Are those accurate, or are there other expectations we bring with us each week?

What are our expectations as a church? Do we expect new people to just come through our doors who think, look, and act exactly like we do? Do we expect visitors to visit, even if we do not extend a personal invitation? Do we expect that a shiny, new building is all that is necessary to grow Christ’s Church? Do we expect the next person to take care of that ministry opportunity, that leadership role, that pastoral care need, while we passively receive what the church provides us?

I wonder if too often we get our own expectations confused with what are God’s expectations – both of us as individuals, and of us as the church. Sometimes, we have to step back, gain a bit more perspective, and discern what God expects of us as disciples of his Son, Jesus Christ.

In Paul’s Letter to the Romans, we hear the apostle sharing what God’s expectations are for us as followers of Christ. After eleven chapters of laying out the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ, Paul moves in chapter twelve to how we are to live in the light of that love. We are “to present our bodies as a living sacrifice,” to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds, so we might discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:1-2).

And in the passage we have read this morning, Paul centers on the tension between good and evil, love and hate. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good” (12:9). Love is not meant to be skin-deep; it must permeate our whole selves. It must not stop at the surface when we are done with a project to feed the needy, for instance; it must penetrate our hearts and souls and minds, causing us to pray, to work, to lobby for the needs of the less-fortunate so that justice might prevail. Love must be genuine; for if it is, then good will prevail, and hate will not.

In encouraging his listeners, Paul then states ways to show how God expects us to model genuine love: outdo each other in honoring and helping one another, be ardent and strong in spirit, meet suffering with patience, help

those who are in need, and welcome the stranger (12:10-13). These actions are the natural extension of love leading one's heart, and they reflect the same love God showed the world in the form of Jesus Christ his Son.

In the remainder of this passage, Paul is concerned over how the church will respond to those who persecute Christians. We read throughout Acts and the Epistles how those who affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ were often the objects of hate and persecution by those in authority. And Paul is careful to make a distinction between how Christians are to respond to those who commit evil against them.

While he states very clearly to "hate what is evil," he does not say repay evil with evil. Instead, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God" (12:14,17,19). These words reflect the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Beatitudes, as he taught not to bring violence upon those who hate you, but show love instead.

Paul then quotes directly Proverbs 25 when he says: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (12:20). To truly follow Jesus, you must be able to put away your feelings of revenge or retribution, and instead offer help and compassion to those who seek to hurt or work against you.

What does God expect from us as disciples of Jesus Christ? How do we work to get our expectations a bit more in-line with God's expectations? And how do these shared expectations lead us to grow in spiritual nurture and evangelism?

I believe God expects us to model the love we have first been shown in Jesus Christ. That love is not to be reserved for only those who are the easiest to love. That love is to be extended to the stranger, the enemy, the other. When we truly embody God's love for us in Jesus Christ, then we are faithfully living as an open, caring community.

I also believe God expects us to not remain content, but to strive to spread this good news of salvation to all around us. The Great Commission, as Chris Roseland said two weeks ago, is our ultimate mission statement: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28: 19-20). Are we submitting ourselves to Christ's command when we come and go through this place on Sundays or other days of the week, and then don't consider opportunities to invite others to join us? Do we as a church expect that we will always have the people we need to "survive"? Or do we ever wish to raise our expectations to "thrive" as a community of faith?

[For those who distributed the invitation cards this week, how did that feel? What did you expect would happen? What actually happened? How

did it leave you feeling afterwards – would you never do it again, or did you feel free to do it again?]

We are a congregation which is full of life and love and energy and care. We are a people of faith who continue to grow and challenge one another. But the days of building a church and waiting for everyone to show up are long gone, folks. People have to have a reason to want to come, and we have to truly want them to come. That is why we have not changed our identity with our new logo and tag line, but better clarified and expressed our identity in and through them. We will continue to grow and be interconnected with one another and our community. But we must raise our expectations to God's expectations – never assuming the status quo is good enough, but that the call to love can truly change this world.

It has become popular these days to say, "It is what it is," meaning this is what life has dealt us. I catch myself saying it a lot. And yet I heard an interesting twist on that phrase this week. Pat Summitt, the head coach of the University of Tennessee's women's basketball team, announced that she has been diagnosed with early-stage dementia at the age of 59. It will likely lead to Alzheimer's Disease. This is a high-profile case of the cruelest of diseases.

While she could have cursed this strange twist of fate, and resigned herself to what life has dealt her, Summitt's response has been courageous and hopeful. In fact, she included this aforementioned phrase in an interview I heard her give on the radio this week. She said, "It is what it is, but it will become what you make of it" (<http://www.npr.org/2011/08/25/139952843/sports-writer-discusses-summitts-dementia-diagnosis>).

If you expect things to remain the way they are, they will remain that way. If you raise your expectations for the future, they will become what you – and God – make of it.

What does God expect of us? "Love one another with mutual affection; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord; extend hospitality to strangers; bless those who persecute you; live in harmony with one another."

May we strive to exceed our Lord's expectations. Amen.