

Matthew 5:13-20    Bill Uetrict    2.2.23    5 Epiphany

The readings for today have got me thinking about expectation. We all live in light of it. Many of us grew up in households in which the expectations were big. Some of you have told me that. For some of you, the expectations were somewhat oppressive: more, more, better, better. That wasn't really the case in my life. I grew up in a strong blue collar, working-class family and community. My people weren't the kind who were always climbing ladders. That notion was somewhat foreign to us. We were the sort who, as country and blue grass singer Ricky Skaggs says: "Didn't want to get above our raising."

Contentment with where you are was, I suppose, the expectation, although admittedly, I knew a lot about moral expectation. My Mom definitely had a sense of how people should act. My relatives who drank too much and who participated in a religion that promoted bingo were not acting as they should. And Bev and I, if we, you know, got a little too friendly, we weren't acting as we should. And we heard about it.

Most all of us live in light of expectation. I suspect that many of us have grown to think that one of the very good things about following Jesus is that the expectation bar has been lowered. We've been confronted with the Old Testament, and we go, wow, that sure is a lot of work, a lot of rules, a lot of do's and don'ts. I know that's an exaggerated and probably misguided view of the Old Testament, but it's what many of us think is true. Jesus is all about grace, we say. And grace is about ease. Grace is about giving you and me a pass. Grace is about moving beyond the law. Grace is about lower expectation.

Well, not according to Matthew's Jesus. Jesus today, and frankly, throughout much of Matthew, is not making it easy on us. In some ways, the expectation bar is being raised, not lowered. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to

abolish, but to fulfill.” And then this: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” These words make it appear that the expectations are being set quite high, in some ways, higher than that we received from the Old Testament.

Before I move on, though, let me make it clear that when Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees or we won’t enter the kingdom of heaven, he’s not talking about going or not going to heaven when we die. The kingdom of heaven is not the place you go when you die. It’s God’s reign, God’s way of doing things in this life. Jesus is not inviting you to jump through higher hoops so that you can go to heaven. He is inviting you to a greater righteousness, or as the word really means, a greater justice, in the living of your lives right now.

The expectation bar seems to have been raised. This following Jesus stuff, according to Matthew’s take on it, is in some ways not easier, but more difficult than what we received before Jesus. That will be especially true in the next couple of weeks when Jesus will tell us that the commandment not to murder is not limited to literally killing people; it involves how we use our words toward people. And he will tell us that adultery is not limited to cheating on our spouses; it entails looking on a person with lust in order to control them. The expectations will get bigger, not smaller.

What we know about Matthew’s gospel is that it was written to Jewish Christians. And many people wonder, with good reason, if Matthew in his gospel isn’t trying to temper the message that is coming out of the folks who followed Paul and Paul’s teachings. The perception was that Paul didn’t believe in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, that he was throwing out the foundations of the faith. Now Paul would probably argue with that perception, and, in fact, did. He said he wasn’t

trying to eliminate expectation. He just redefined the expectation. No, you don't have to be circumcised. No, you don't have to follow the food laws. Yes, you could eat ham sandwiches and pork rinds. Yes, Jesus sets you free. But this is not a freedom without expectation. The expectation is love of the neighbor, Paul was saying.

But many felt that Paul's thought went too far, that it would give people excuses to do whatever they darn well please. And I suspect that Matthew was one of those many. Listen what Jesus says in Matthew: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches others will be called great [in God's way of doing things]."

What Jesus is up to is connected to what has happened before. He isn't eliminating the before. He is a part of the before. He is a Jew, and the law is a significant part of what it means to be Jewish. He is not eliminating the law. He is not eliminating expectation. Yes, according to Matthew, he is fulfilling it. And when you fulfill something, you are bringing that thing to some kind of completion. There is an ending involved in fulfillment. You fulfilled your goals. You brought them to their appropriate end. If Jesus fulfills the law, he is bringing it to its intended end, which means that there are going to be some new things that flow from fulfillment. Expectation is not coming to an end. It is changing. "You have heard it said 'an eye for an eye,' but I say to you do not seek revenge." The expectation bar is actually being raised.

I have to wonder if sometimes expectation is given a bad name. I know folks who grew up in households where there were almost no expectations. And you may think that it is good news, but what I noticed is that it actually was bad news. No expectation sometimes

meant no performance or bad performance. No expectation meant that some folks didn't get off the couch. No expectation meant that some folks just behaved badly because there were no expectations for them to do otherwise. And that didn't benefit them or anybody else.

To follow Jesus is not to be invited into lower expectations. Note how he makes that perfectly clear in the beginning part of our gospel reading today: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Don't hide the light. It would make no sense for you to light a candle, and then put it under some kind of basket. Let it shine. Others need to see it." That is not eliminated expectation.

I've got to note, however, how Jesus in Matthew describes the expectation for you and me and for us together. He doesn't say you should become the salt of the earth or should work hard enough to become the light of the world. He says, "You *are* the salt of the earth," and you *are* the light of the world." Expectation, Jesus style, comes with an awareness of who you are as God's people. And who you are is salt for the earth. Salt was a means to pay people. The word for "salt" is connected to the word we use for "salary." In other words, you matter. You are worth a lot. What's more, building on the salt metaphor, you bring a distinctive flavor to life. You make life a lot more interesting. So don't go wasting your saltiness.

And, while we are at it, you are the light of the world. You, we together, bring light. Do not underestimate what you offer to the world. Where you go you bring light. In Old Testament times, the Torah, God's law, the rabbis and religious authorities were described as the light of the world. You and we together are in great company with those who have gone before us. We are light. And let's be honest, the world needs light.

So, what's the expectation? Be who we are. Be the salt and the light that we are. The expectation is not to prove ourselves and our

community. The expectation is living into who we already are. Who we already are is loved. Who we already are is claimed. Who we already are is children of God. We are salt. We are light. Now the call is to live like it. Therefore, love. Practice forgiveness. Tend to the forgotten. Feed the poor. Do justice. In other words, allow your righteousness to become greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

We as a congregation have reached a significant goal in our life together. We have fulfilled our obligations. We have brought them to their intended end. We have paid off our mortgage. Because of hard work and generosity on your part and because of a remarkable gift from one who experienced in us salt and life, we have fulfilled all righteousness. Shew!!! We now breathe a great sigh of relief. Expectation must be finished!

Heck no! Expectation continues. In fact, in some ways, the expectation bar has been raised. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We matter. We are worth a lot. Our mission is needed. We've got big work to do. Quoting Isaiah, we as salt and light are being called to "loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our homes."

Just think what we can be about because we aren't shelling out all kinds of money to pay off this great facility that, yes, has been used for great things. Just think how the light can shine. And the salt can be tasted. This is not a time to sit back and relax, to pretend that there aren't expectations set before us. This isn't a time to give less. No, this is a time to be who we are. This is a time for a greater righteousness, a time for a greater focus on the needs of a hurting world.