

# **“What Do You Expect?” by David W. Lloyd**

**August 17, 2014**

## **Tenth Sunday After Pentecost**

I want you to close your eyes a minute and think about what you expect when you come to Seekers worship: maybe something or someone to see, something to hear, something to taste during coffee hour, something to touch, maybe even something to smell, something that may happen.

Open your eyes. Hold your hand up if something came to you. Let's hear what came to you. (Items were written down on an easel as they were spoken.)

These are just some of our expectations for coming to Seekers worship. The lectionary from Genesis about Joseph and his half-brothers in Egypt is about expectation, or to be more precise, about different sets of expectations. By the time of the lection we heard today Joseph's half-brothers have been through a range of experiences that upset all their expectations. Joseph's half-brothers came to Egypt to buy grain during a famine in Canaan. They expected to be treated with disrespect by the Egyptians, especially by this nobleman. What they didn't expect was to be accused of espionage and to be imprisoned for three days. Nor did they expect that this nobleman would release them and tell them that he believed in the God of Israel. Nor did they expect for one of them to be re-imprisoned while the others were directed to bring back the youngest brother, Benjamin, the only one who was a full brother to Joseph. Nor did they expect that when the grain was packed on their donkey their money was secretly returned and hidden in their things. Nor

did they expect Jacob to refuse to send Benjamin right away, leaving Simeon in prison. When the famine grew more severe, they went back to Egypt, not only with Benjamin but also with twice the amount of money so that they could also pay for the grain they had been given the first time. They didn't expect the Egyptian nobleman to be forgiving of their failure to pay for the grain the first time, or to dine with them (since Egyptians disliked Canaanites who ate the meat of animals the Egyptians considered sacred). Nor did they expect the nobleman's goblet to be hidden in Benjamin's things, and to hear that he would become a slave as a result of his presumed theft. Nothing had happened the way they thought it would.

Now Judah has related what he expects will happen: Jacob will die of grief, having lost two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, the only sons of the wife Jacob loved the most, Rachel. And Judah, who like his half-brothers had plotted Joseph's death but had come up with the idea of selling Joseph to passing Ishmaelites, had seen Jacob's grief at the false news of Joseph's death in the pit, is now is willing to take Benjamin's place as the slave. If the nobleman agrees to this Judah won't have to see Jacob's grief nor Jacob's blaming looks at losing another son. But things don't turn out as Judah expected either.

It is interesting to speculate on what Joseph expected to happen when he first recognized his half-brothers after they arrived in Egypt. Did he expect them to recognize him? If so, did he expect them to ask for his forgiveness? If they didn't recognize him, did he expect them to band together and all go to prison rather than have Jacob risk losing another son? What did he expect would happen when they didn't return immediately with Benjamin? What did he expect would happen when they discovered the goblet in Benjamin's things? Did he expect that he would have such a strong emotional reaction?

In the actual moment Joseph rips all their expectations to shreds. He reveals himself as their half-brother, something

they never expected. He doesn't explicitly forgive them but he welcomes them to live in Egypt, again something they never expected. He tells them to bring Jacob and all their dependents down to Egypt, too, so that all his family could survive the famine. Joseph summed up the whole sequence of events from the time he shared his gift of interpreting dreams with his half-brothers, leading them to seize him and throw him into the pit, through his journey to Egypt, his service with Potiphar and his time in prison, his interpretation of dreams of bountiful years and of famine, leading to his rise to become a governor of Egypt, until now when he reconciled with his half-brothers. He claimed it was God who sent him ahead of his half-brothers to Egypt to save lives by prudent storage of grain, and to save his half-brothers and all their families. That is something not only unexpected, but far beyond their dread of having to bow down to Joseph, as they had heard him interpret his dream back in his boyhood.

Somehow Joseph had become a man of faith. It wasn't just that he believed abstractly in the God of Israel, that is, the god of his father, his grandfather Isaac, and his great grandfather Abraham. It was that he seemed to live his life with integrity, believing in his God-given gift of dream interpretation, and learning to exercising this God-given gift appropriately. But I think it safe to say that as a boy in Canaan, he did not expect that God would use him to save his family and thus carry on the faith of Abraham to future generations.

The passages in Matthew's Gospel this month also focus on expectations. Jesus had been trying to cope with the news of the death of his cousin and mentor, John the Baptizer. He expected to get away to a private place, needing time and space to mourn, to pray, to reflect on his next steps. And so in the lectionary two weeks ago he had withdrawn privately by boat to a lonely place, but people heard about it and came in huge throngs to the place where he would come ashore,

expecting that he would teach them and heal those who were sick. It was in that lonely place that the disciples expected him to send the people away so that they could buy food for themselves. Instead, Jesus told them to feed the multitude. The disciples expected him to relent when they showed him how little food there was. Instead, he shattered their expectations by giving this meager food to them to distribute and not only was the multitude fed but there were twelve baskets of leftover scraps. The lectionary last week began with Jesus sending the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he sent the crowd away. Then Jesus prayed alone in that lonely place. How did the disciples expect him to rejoin them? In the middle of the night a storm came up and the disciples were terrified to see him coming to their boat by walking on the rough waters. Peter, not sure whether it was really Jesus or a ghost, called out to Jesus, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you over the water." Did Peter expect Jesus to answer or did he expect silence? Hearing Jesus' voice, Peter began walking on the water. Did he expect to succeed or did he expect to sink? Jesus saved Peter, they climbed into the boat and the storm ended. The boat landed at Gennesaret, on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee. Did Jesus expect to be with the disciples away from the crowds? We don't know, but he was recognized and the crowds of the sick were brought to him for healing.

Matthew's text continues with a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and experts in the Torah from the Temple in Jerusalem, although the lectionary omits it. They asked him why his disciples didn't follow the ancient tradition about washing their hands before a meal. They may have expected Jesus to declare ignorance about this or they may have expected him to admit this, but they clearly expected him to make some act of atonement, along with a promise to follow the tradition rigorously from now on. Instead, Jesus turned on them and pointed out an example of their hypocrisy when they break the Torah to follow the tradition.

The optional portion of this week's gospel begins at this point when Jesus called to the crowd and said that a person is not defiled but goes into the mouth but what comes out of it. The disciples came to him to let him know that the Pharisees had taken great offense to what Jesus had said to them. They expected the Pharisees to take action against Jesus; they may have been tugging at him to lead him away from any further confrontation. The text says that Jesus was dismissive. I imagine him saying loudly enough for the Pharisees and lawyers to hear, "They are blind guides and if one blind man guides another they will both fall into a ditch."

The standard portion of this week's gospel picks up here. Jesus left the area of Gennesaret proceeded through Upper Galilee, an area of refugees since the time of Herod the Great, to the Phoenician coast, otherwise known as the region of Tyre and Sidon. Despite being a province of Syria under Roman control, and thus subject to Greco-Roman culture, the ancient Canaanite religion continued. This was the worship of Baal and his consort Ashtart, the religion that always tempted ancient Israel. If ever there was a location of impurity or defilement, this land was it. What did Jesus expect to find here? A place to hide from both King Herod, who had imprisoned and then executed John the Baptist, and from the Pharisees, who might seek to have him executed for blasphemy? A place to continue his mourning for John and to restore his soul, away from the crowds that always demanded miracles of healing?

Whatever his expectations, Jesus found something else. A Canaanite woman, that is, not only a Gentile but a person whose ethnicity symbolized the continuing challenge to faithfulness to the God of Israel, called to him seeking healing for her daughter. Not only did she call to him, but she said, "Son of David," which as a Gentile she had no right to say to a Jew. King Hiram of Tyre had been a contemporary of King David and King Solomon, who had taken one of Hiram's

daughters as a wife. How would she know that Jesus was descended from David? She probably expected that this would get his attention and help.

Jesus said nothing to her. The disciples urged him to send her away, perhaps fearing that her shouting would draw attention to him, thus leading to an end of the isolation he sought. Jesus responded to them, not to her, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel alone. He expected that she would go away and that would be the end of the matter. But she fell to his feet, pleading. Finally he responded to her with an insult, "It's not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs." In biblical times, as in many places in the third world today, dogs were scavengers rather than pets and were considered to be unclean. In Jesus' day, to call a person a dog was to indicate he was a Gentile. Jesus expected that she would leave, insulted. But once again she confounded his expectation by replying that dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' table. That is, she would willingly take in Jesus' teachings, which righteous Jews would not, especially not the Pharisees and Temple authorities he had just dealt with. Jesus was amazed at her faith, and her child was healed instantly.

The disciples had had little faith that they could feed the multitude, but they did. Peter had demonstrated by his sinking that he had little faith. But this woman, the epitome of the people who rejected the faith of Israel, had had great faith, and Jesus could only respond with admiration and give her what she desired above all.

If measured by the standards of the Pharisees and the Temple authorities, the woman was impure. But what she had said revealed her purity of heart – nothing was as important as her daughter's health. What was in her heart and what she said were in perfect correlation.

For the early Church, this story may reflect actual

experiences of the apostles as they moved from evangelizing their fellow Jews to evangelizing Gentiles. They may have found Gentile women and men whose faith in Jesus was deeper than that of their fellow Jews. They may have found Gentile women and men whose words revealed their purity of heart.

So the challenge for us is to examine our expectations and possibly rethink them. What do we expect of worship here at Seekers? What do we expect in our mission groups and ministry groups? What do we expect of our community life? Where are we applying standards of purity to test ends or means, standards that may not be relevant? Does what comes out of our mouths reflect what is in our hearts? How do we react when others act in unexpected ways or say unexpected things?

And do we, like Joseph, see the hand of God in our lives, working for a larger purpose?