

Luke 7:18-23 “Expecting the Unexpected”

1. Every year on our anniversary, my wife Regan and I share a dinner together and each year, we talk about our history – how we met, our first date, our journey together. One particular at this annual conversation, I discovered that before we met, she had developed something she called, “the list.” And she revealed to me that she had a list of expectations of what she was looking for in a man. And little did I know that early on, she was comparing me to “the list.” Well, now I was incredibly intrigued and asked what was on that list, fully expecting it to be a perfect description of me, of course. But no...on the list were attributes like: tall, blonde, athletic, someone who is the life of the party, and someone who is not planning to be a pastor. Well, I failed miserably. You can take one look at me and see that I did not fully meet her expectations. And so she had a choice to either reject me (which thankfully she didn’t) or to reexamine those expectations and let go of some of them, and see me for who I was.
2. The story in our Gospel lesson today is about expectations. From his prison cell, locked up and isolated, experiencing loneliness and uncertainty, John the Baptist sent his messengers to ask Jesus a question, “Are you the *one* who is to come or should we *expect* someone else?” John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, had expected one to come and bring immediate judgment. John himself was a radical prophet. He lived in the desert, ate locusts and honey, and was probably a Nazirite which means he had taken a vow not to cut his hair. (Think no-shave November but for like 30 years). And his message was equally radical...calling people in his preaching to repent, to turn around, because the Messiah was coming and he was going to come with unquenchable fire. Those were John’s words.
3. Others had hopes about a coming king. Some believed he would come as a military ruler, establish an army, and get rid of the Romans, bring freedom for the Jewish people, and set up God’s kingdom on earth.
4. *But*, Jesus did not fully meet their expectations. Instead of bringing fire and judgment, Jesus came talking about mercy and forgiveness. Instead of raising up an army *against* the Romans, Jesus *healed* a Roman soldier’s servant and he talked about loving enemies. He sat down with tax collectors and prostitutes and those on the fringes of society. He touched lepers and gave sight to the blind...crossing all religious and social boundaries in order to bring wholeness to people’s lives. All of these things Jesus was doing were envisioned by the prophet Isaiah. But Jesus’ preaching and actions offended most religious people of his day because he didn’t fit their “list.” And the biggest scandal of all, Jesus would bring about God’s kingdom through suffering and death on a Roman cross. No wonder Jesus said to John, “blessed is anyone who does not stumble because of me.”
5. I think it’s easy to criticize those people in the past for not fully recognizing God in their midst, but I wonder if we sometimes create lists of expectations that keep us from seeing God at work around us.
6. In the film Bruce Almighty, Bruce is an incredibly self-centered person...angry and frustrated with God because he doesn’t get a promotion at work, he doesn’t get all of the things he thinks he wants, and God doesn’t meet his expectations or desires. He curses God and doubts his goodness and love. Hearing Bruce’s complaints, God comes to Bruce (as Morgan Freeman of course) and says, “You think you can do it better? Be my guest!” And so God gives his power to Bruce for a few days and says, “you be God and let’s see how you do.” At first, Bruce revels in his power bringing glory and pleasure to himself but then the job gets real as he begins to hear the prayers of all the people of the earth. Some asking for restored relationships. Some for food on the table or a job so they can pay the bills. Others praying for more possessions and several thousand pray to win the lottery. And so, not sure what to

do, Bruce Almighty just says “yes” to every prayer and the whole world is thrown into chaos as a result. God asks him about his decision to do that and Bruce says, “There were so many. I just gave them all what they wanted.” And God responds with this question: “But since when does *anyone* have a clue about what they *really* want?”

7. As I reflect on John’s expectations of Jesus, and our often misguided expectations of God, I’m thankful he doesn’t always give us what we think we want. If Jesus had come as we expected, he would reveal a God made in our own image, reflecting our own selfishness, our own biases, loving only the people we love, reinforcing our own ideas of what *we* think God should be. But the good news is this: Instead of meeting all of our expectations, Jesus challenges them. Instead of meeting all of our wants, Jesus reveals a God who meets our deepest *needs*. In Jesus, God gives us the thing we need the most – himself - and to know and be known by the God who made us - to be healed and made whole by the God who loves us – to be empowered to serve others by the God who calls us....These are our deepest longings, whether we know it or not. And if we try to fill them with anything else, we’ll find ourselves empty. St. Augustine expressed it in his prayer, “God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.”
8. So...What kind of God are *you* expecting? Are you like John...your restless heart wondering if Jesus is really the one? Can he really be trusted? The Scriptures declare that yes, Jesus is God’s answer to our deepest need and not only ours, but the needs of the whole world. And if we’re willing to let go of our own “lists” and see him for who he is, then we’ll discover that we can trust him with our past, our present, *and* our future. We can allow him to be our Savior *and* our Lord. And we can follow him in obedience wherever he leads us, allowing him to build *us* into a community that will do as he did...healing the sick....bringing good news to the poor...and welcoming those on the outside. As we come to the table of the Lord today, bring your restlessness, your uncertainties, your brokenness, and your questions. But above all, come expecting the unexpected and receive the one who came for you. Amen.