

Letting Go of Expectation

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When I was a kid, about five or six years old, our family's favorite vacation spot was Chattanooga, Tennessee. Now, my parents picked Chattanooga because I was obsessed with trains and Chattanooga had a hotel called the Chattanooga Choo Choo. It was an old train station that had been converted into a hotel. Some of the rooms were old train sleeper cars. They had a huge model train collection. There was a small train – like that have an amusement park -- that I could ride on. It was amazing.

And then they had just cool hotel stuff like restaurants and swimming pools. In fact, it was at the Chattanooga Choo Choo where I learned to swim. One of their pools had this big slide that was super fun...I mean probably 20, 25 feet high. Now, I was afraid of my head going under water, so even though I was wearing floaties, I wanted my dad to stand underneath the slide and catch me. And that's what he did. There's no telling how long I made my dad stand there while I came down the slide, swam to the side of the pool, got out and did the whole thing all over again. But one time, my dad missed. My little brother jumped on him and distracted him just as I was coming down the slide and I went under water for a second. And guess what: nothing happened. I realized that wasn't so bad. So I got out of the pool, took off my floaties, went to the shallow end and started swimming.

I loved Chattanooga and I loved the Chattanooga Choo Choo. Now as I got older, I grew out of my train phase and our family started going other places for vacation. But ever so often, we'd tell a story or I'd see something that would make me think about the Chattanooga Choo Choo and about what an amazing place it is. So you can imagine my excitement when one year for Christmas – this was right after Nina was born, Mary Page and I opened a present from Mary Page's Mom and it was a gift certificate for a 2 night stay in the Chattanooga Choo Choo. Ya'll! I don't know if I've ever been more excited about a present in my life.

So we left Nina with the grandparents and headed to Chattanooga for a few days. And the gift certificate was not just for any room – it was for one of the train sleeper cars. And so we checked in and went to our room and it was cool, but it was a little small. But that was ok. The first thing I wanted to do was to walk Mary Page through the grounds of the Choo Choo and show her everything. We went to see the model trains. They were fine. I took her to the swimming pool where I learned to swim and was going to show her the 25 foot slide and, well, it was no longer a slide because apparently the hotel's insurance decided having a slide was too much liability. It was just a swimming pool. And we went to what was one of my favorite restaurants as a kid and the food was...well, not great.

I mean don't get me wrong. The Chattanooga Choo Choo was a perfectly fine place to stay, but it didn't live up to what I had remembered. I had such high expectations and it just didn't measure up and because I had such high expectations, I was a little disappointed.

Today we finish our sermon series Letting Go by focusing on Letting Go of Expectations. Now, I do think it is true that the higher our expectations, the higher the possibility for disappointment. But I don't think that, in and of itself, is a reason to let go of them. In fact, in some cases, I think it's healthy to have expectations. I expect certain things of myself that I think help me be a better person or do a good job at my work. I think that's healthy.

However, I do think there are ways expectations can impact us and our relationships that are dangerous. Sometimes, when we place expectations upon another, our image of them becomes more real in our own mind than who they really are. In other words, instead of accepting them for who they are, we want to make them into who we want them to be. So for example, a college student tells her parents that she's going to be a nurse and the parent responds, "Oh, well, I expected you to be a doctor." Or in a romantic relationship, one partner tries to make the other person into who they want them to be rather than getting to know them for who they actually are.

I think we can do this with other people, we can do it with ourselves, and we can do this with our faith. And one of the ways we do this with our faith is when we, without questioning, believe that God wants the same thing we want and that God is against the same things we are against.

The writer Anne Lamott says, "You know you've created God in your Image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." By placing our own expectations on who God is, or who Jesus is, then it is easy to make them into who we want them to be. That's why, for pretty much the history of religion, people have tried to say God was on their side against whatever group they perceived to not be on their side. I think we see this clearly in our Scripture today where Jesus enters into Jerusalem to much celebration.

Now to understand the expectations that people would have had for Jesus riding into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting Hosanna and waving palms and putting their coats on the ground, you need to know a little about the history of Jerusalem. In the year 586 BC, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian empire. The temple was burnt to the ground and the people were carried off to Babylon to live in exile. The Persians then conquered the Babylonians and the people were allowed to return home and rebuild the temple but Jerusalem was still ruled over by a foreign power. The Greek empire then conquered the Persians and now Jerusalem and the people were ruled over by the Greeks. So, for several hundred years, the people of Jerusalem had been ruled over by a foreign power.

The Greeks wanted to spread Greek culture all over the territories they conquered. They wanted to Hellenize Jerusalem. So the Greek emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes had a statue of Zeus erected in the temple. It was fine for the Jewish people to continue worshipping God, but they also had to worship the Greek gods. They had to turn away from their own culture and accept Greek culture, Greek ideas. And that was a huge problem. Because for the people, these practices were central to their identity as a people. They were central to their covenant with God. And it was not ok to just worship Zeus alongside God. They all knew that the very first of

the 10 commandments was, “you shall have no other Gods before me.” So the priest Mattathias refused to follow the king’s orders – refused to worship the statue of Zeus, refused to give up Jewish culture and so war broke out. The Greeks slaughtered 1000 of Mattathias followers but Mattathias still continued to resist. When he was too old to continue, his son Judas Maccabee continued the fight. And guess what, they won. The Maccabees drove out the Greeks and Judas came into Jerusalem riding victoriously on his war horse and guess what the crowds were doing – they were shouting and waving palm branches (just like in our Scripture, just like what they were doing when Jesus came into the city). Judas drove out all of the Greeks from Jerusalem, destroyed the statue of Zeus in the temple, and cleansed the temple of all things foreign. For the first time in hundreds of years, Jerusalem had its independence. And that lasted for about 100 years until the Romans conquered.

When Jesus came riding into the city, the expectation was clear. He’s riding into the city just like Judas Maccabees did. He will drive out our enemies. He will purify the temple. He is here to save us. And he was, but not in the way they expected. Rather than riding in on a war horse, he came on a humble colt, a young donkey, a symbol of peace. This was not the king coming ready to do battle. This was a different kind of king. This was a king coming in humility, coming in peace, coming in love. And as soon as Jesus comes to Jerusalem, he goes straight to the temple. Just like Judas does. And just like Judas, Jesus drives people out. But there’s a key difference. Judas drove out all the foreigners. Jesus drove out those who would make the temple more exclusive, drove out those who thought they could sell access to God.

You see, the temple was the biggest money maker in all of Jerusalem. People came from all over to offer sacrifices at the temple and merchants set up tables in the temple courtyard to sell the sacrifices. And they jacked up the prices. The priests told people that you had to buy from these merchants for God to love you. It wasn’t dissimilar from the TV evangelist who promises you healing if you send them a check. They were selling access to God which is bad enough in and of itself. But what happened was that poor people, people who couldn’t afford a sacrifice, either gave up their live-li-hood to pay for one or were told that they could not be forgiven by God.

During my first year as a pastor, an elderly woman who I knew well because she regularly came to eat in our church’s soup kitchen came to see me. She needed to borrow a stamp because she needed to send a \$20 bill to a TV evangelist. She literally was giving him everything she had...she didn’t even have a few cents left over to buy a stamp. Her power had been disconnected for months. But she had been fed the lie that God would bless her if she sent this guy money.

That’s what was happening in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem. And so Jesus drove them out. And as he did, he cried out, “My house is to be a house of prayer for ALL people, but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Notice the difference in Jesus’ mission for cleansing the temple and the mission of Judas. For Judas, the problem was that the temple had become too inclusive. Judas cry would be, “This must be a house of prayer for One people.” And that’s what people expected of Jesus.

Jesus, cleanse the temple. Cleanse our city. Drive out the foreigners.

But instead, Jesus came with a different rallying cry. "My house is to be a house of prayer for ALL people." And if Jesus came for ALL people, then that meant his method could never be the same as that of Judas Maccabee. He could never come in war, he could never come in violence against his enemies because those that the crowd considered to be their enemies, those that the crowds wanted driven out, are included as Jesus' people too. A house of prayer for ALL people means that it's a house of prayer even for the Romans, even for the Greeks. And so the only weapon Jesus had at his disposal, the only weapon he could ever take up is that of love.

The crowds expected a king coming in war to fight on their behalf.

Instead Jesus came proclaiming a vision of peace and love that was for all people.

So what does this mean for us. I don't think any of us are expecting Jesus to show up and violently drive out our enemies. But I think all of us have a tendency to think God is on our side. And that's true. God is on our side. And God is on their side...at the same time.

And friends, I know this is so much easier said than done because there are real forces of power and oppression that we need to resist. There are those in the world who uphold structures of racism and injustice, who harm people and especially kids in the LGBTQ community, who exploit the poor along with the Earth's resources, who demonize immigrants. And who make the world a more violent place. Make no mistake, as followers of Jesus we are called to resist all of those forces. We are called to speak out for justice and inclusion and peace. We are called to march and demonstrate and protest when the time calls for that.

But we also have to remember that the same Jesus who said that he has come to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed also said, "love your enemies." He also meant for the Romans to be included. He really means it when he says, "my house is to be house of prayer for ALL people." For Jesus, ALL really means ALL. And any expectation we have that Jesus will take our side against them (whoever they may be), we are called to Let Go of that expectation. That doesn't mean we let those who would hurt us, hurt us. It doesn't mean we let those who offer condemnation to many in our community do that without calling them out. It doesn't mean we don't continue to speak out against policies that hurt families, that promote oppression, and that do harm. But it does mean we never demonize the people who are enacting that. It means we remember that they too are God's children and God loves them as much as God loves us.

Scripture has another image of Palm branches. It's in the book of Revelation, chapter 7. Listen to these words: *After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.* ¹⁰ *They cried out in a loud voice, saying,*

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Several hundred years before Jesus entered Jerusalem, Judas Maccabees came as the crowds waved palms. He came to liberate the people from the nations. Today, we remember that Jesus

too came riding into Jerusalem not to liberate the people from the nations but rather for the nations, proclaiming a vision of peace and love for all humankind – a vision that includes people from every nation, from every tribe, from every culture, from every language.

As you leave today, I want you ask yourself this question, “Is there anybody, is there any group that I have wanted – either explicitly or implicitly – for Jesus to be against?” And I invite you to remember the palm branches scattered all around this altar and may they be a reminder to let go off the expectation that says God is against them, that God is against anyone. And instead, to take up the vision offered to us in Revelation – that God has enough love for them and for you. That God has enough love for ALL people, everywhere and that we will let go of any and every expectation that seeks to limit who God’s love is for.