

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
Sunday, January 31, 2016  
*Our Deep Need for God*

I often have high expectations of people whom I meet. Now that I wrote that sentence, it seems like an overgeneralized statement. I often have high expectations of people whom I meet. However, after writing it, I did not want to modify it. I wanted to ponder it to see what it might say about me – and maybe about you. I have high expectation in regard to honesty, truth telling and direct communication. It seems to speak a truth about myself – whether I like that truth about myself or not. I don't necessarily like having high expectations of others since that means that I also have a high probability of being disappointed by people. Maybe the aspect that I don't like about that statement is that it implies that I am a judgmental person. I try not to be judgmental, but it does seem to be in my nature. Also, the highest expectations that I have are for myself. That reality carries its own challenges.

An example of my high expectations - that are even exacerbated - is when I meet someone "in person" whom I have admired from a distance. When I worked at Pathways, we had an "outside speakers" program that meant we brought people into our facility from out-of-state. They often were well-respected practitioners of holistic health therapies, and/or they were renowned authors in the field of holistic health or spirituality. I had the privilege of hosting them and often getting to know them on a more personal basis. I am pleased to report that the vast majority of these persons lived up to my high expectations in a vast majority of their personal lives. However, on some occasions, I experienced disappointment. One Buddhist meditation master who I hosted turned out to be a smoker. It just did not fit the image.

In regard to our text from Luke, I am wondering about the high expectations that those who were present in the synagogue had of Jesus. They knew Jesus as the son of Joseph, the Carpenter. Commentators suggest that some of those gathered may have been neighbors or even family members. Today's text is the first time they had seen Jesus since they had received word and testimony that Jesus had performed many miracles and healings away from Nazareth. They may have had even higher expectations based on this awareness. They may have had the expectation that Jesus would surely wish to give honor to his family and friends by performing similar miracles and healings there in Nazareth. They may have had the expectation that they would be able to claim him as one of their own and receive even some credit for his ministry.

What an epiphany it must have been to those gathered when Jesus read the verse that concluded last week's lectionary reading and was repeated to begin this week's lectionary reading: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* (Luke 4: 21) The response of the congregation to these words from Jesus is: *"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"* Luke 4: 22) Commentators disagree about the meaning of the reference to Jesus being Joseph's son.

It could have again signaled their pride in someone they know being the promised messiah. Or it could have meant that they doubted his words since he was someone so familiar and did not fit their expectations of the promised messiah.

No matter which meaning we take from that verse, how is it possible that we find ourselves only a few verses later with these words: *“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”* (Luke 4: 28 – 29)

What possibly could have changed the mood of this gathering so quickly? In what ways did Jesus possibly fail to fulfill their expectations to such an extent as to cause them to be “filled with rage”? Not just in disagreement with what he said. Not just murmuring about the truthfulness of his claims. Not just angry that his stories seem to suggest that the acceptable year of the Lord – or year of Jubilee – might include others from outside the community of Israel. But “filled with rage” and ready to kill him by hurling him off a cliff!

Commentator David L. Ostendorf interprets: that those in the synagogue were *“...incensed that one of their own had the audacity to sit among them and intimate that they would not be the vessels for the unfolding of God’s new narrative.* Ostendorf continues: *“The good news that God bears through Jesus is concurrently jarring news, infuriating news to the temple stalwarts...The good news is not the narrative they were used to, not what they expected from the living God, who had come once again to break through their calcified ways.”*<sup>1</sup>

Jesus failed to meet their expectations big time. The two stories he told demonstrated how God had previously found favor with those outside the people of Israel. These two stories enraged the people in the synagogue because they clearly understood that Jesus was communicating to them, that their expectations would not be fulfilled – his purpose as sent by God was for the outsiders not the insiders. The people in the synagogue were not prepared to hear this message and therefore attempted to kill the messenger.

The other text for today is the letter of Paul to the church in Corinth. On first glance it seems to be very distant and unrelated to the Luke text that we have just explored. This chapter has been known as the love chapter and used most often for weddings as though Paul is lifting up a series of virtues that a married couple needs to attempt to live up to.

However, on second glance, the messages of the two texts may not be as disparate as first perceived. Commentator Jeffrey D. Jones both gives us the context of this chapter in Paul’s letter and draws a direct parallel to the experience of the congregation in Nazareth. He says, *“Paul inserts this passage in his letter not to offer a pious reflection on the way things should be, but rather to call the Corinthians to account for their behavior. Everything he says love is not, they are; everything he says love is, they are not. Not unlike the congregation in Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, those who heard these words more likely*

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

*responded with gasps of shock and anger than ahs of affirmation and delight.*<sup>2</sup> This is a new understanding for me. Maybe I learned it in 1965 in that first college religion class on the writings of Paul, but that is a long time ago.

I believe the love described in Paul's letter also describes the love from God to all God's children. Just like Jesus' message we understand as not just for insiders, but for the outsiders. So God's love is not limited to God's chosen people. God's love is not limited to baptized Christians who profess their faith in God. God's love is not limited to those who belong to a church.

*Commentator Jeffrey R. Jones continues, "The more difficult question is, does Jesus treat his former neighbors with this kind of love? On the surface it does not appear so, and yet this is Jesus, who is for us the exemplar of love in all situations. The dilemma this incident presents opens the door to a discussion of the ways in which love shows itself, if love is always the same as being nice or kind or accepting, and of the ways in which love might confront and provoke."*<sup>3</sup> Experiencing God's love today may also not necessarily make us comfortable.

Ann M. Svennungsen is the bishop of the Minneapolis Synod of the ELCA. In speaking about this text she says, *"... God is interested in hearts. Not beautiful hearts, not pure hearts, nor perfect hearts, but hearts that know their need of God... If there is something that needs to be made clear to us in this season of light and manifestation, it is this deep need that we have for God, and "recognizing our need," Svennungsen writes, "will transform our relations with others."*

May we, today, fully recognize our deep need for God. But not only our deep need for God but the deep need for God that is experienced by those outside of the community of faith. How might we who are gathered in this sanctuary apply Jesus's message today? How might we apply his message about radical inclusion of outsiders into our community through the living out the message of God's universal love? What is the new narrative God might be unfolding here at EMC today? I suggest that we have a deep need for God during our Interim Time and during the Pastoral Search.

May these questions not only be on the hearts and minds of those of us gathered here, but also on the hearts and minds of our search committee and of those candidates who will seek to discern God's call to serve this beloved community of faith. May all involved be open to a true spiritual discernment in our selection process. When a candidate is brought to the congregation for approval, may the congregation also be open to a new narrative that God may be proclaiming. When the new settled pastor begins their ministry may we hold in check our expectations so that God's plan for this community may be fully explored.

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

Thanks be to God for the former pastors of this church who have served this community so faithfully. Thanks be to God for all the members of this beloved community who have faithfully served God and God's mission in the world in the past. Thanks be to God for all the members of this beloved community who are currently serving God and God's mission in the world through this church. And thanks be to God for all the members of this beloved community who will serve God and God's mission in the world into the future. Amen.