

September 2, 2018
15th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Great Expectations”

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Psalm 15

*O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;
Who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a
reproach against their neighbors;
In whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who
stand by their oath even to their hurt;
Who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.*

James 1:19-27

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak,
slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid
yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness
the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and
not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not
doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves
and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the
perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who
act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle
their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure
and undefiled before God, our Creator, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their
distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*
This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks Be to God

Great Expectations

“From those to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Charles Dickens was a master of drawing attention to the needs of the poor and the marginalized of his own time and place, at the dawn of England’s Industrial Age. This was an era of prosperity and opulence for some, and abject desperation for many others. In his novel, *Great Expectations*, we encounter one of these desperate poor, in the character of Pip, a child orphaned at a young age, and left in the care of his working-class relatives who are barely surviving themselves. Yet as a young boy, Pip sees a glimpse of the life that is possible in the world of the aristocracy when he crosses paths with the wealthy and eccentric Ms. Havisham and the young girls she cares for – the beautiful and cruel Estella. Pip longs for the life of a gentleman from the moment he first sets foot inside the Havisham house, and soon begins to look with scorn upon his own lowly background, and working-class relations. Turning his back on his family, it becomes Pip’s mission in life to better himself, to attain the status of gentleman, and to prove himself deserving of Estella’s love and hand in marriage. He believes Ms. Havisham is the key to realizing his audacious dream, and will go to any lengths to win her approval and be seen as worthy in her eyes.

Often, we believe that walking the path of righteousness is about appearing worthy. We place our highest value in believing the right things and saying the right things, so that we can look good in the eyes of God, and it becomes so easy for us to point out when we see others going astray. We forget why we’ve been called into this life of faith.

The psalmist in this morning’s first reading asks:

“Who is worthy to abide in your tent, Oh God?”

The response from within the psalm illustrates God’s own great expectations for each one of us. Who is worthy to enter the presence of God, you ask? Well let me tell you. Don’t worry it’s a short list of qualities: all you have to do is walk blamelessly, speak truth from the heart, do no evil, speak no slander against your neighbor, don’t profit off of the misfortunes of others ... In other words, none of us. None of us are worthy. Not one of us is worthy to abide in the presence of God. But, if anything will make us worthy, these scriptures make clear to us that it will be the care we give to others, and not our judgment. Both of these writers seem to recognize an essential truth of human life and Christian faith: There are times when each one of us is doing the very best we can, with the very best

intentions, to live the most faithful and blameless life possible and still we fall short.

In those moments the last thing any of us wants is to hear from our fellow human beings what a terrible job we are doing.

Scholar A.K.M. Adam observes that the writer of James cares particularly about the ways that we speak to one another:

“Precisely because speech is so easy, so immediate, and so very hard to control”, Adam tells us, “James sees it as the test case for genuine faithfulness. You cannot, he counsels us, casually insult your neighbor (who, like you, is made in God’s own image) and presume to be approved by God. You cannot give voice to God’s wrath out of your own irritation at another.”

It is not our job as faithful Christians to call out the missteps of our friends and neighbors. This does not mean that we can neglect our duty to draw attention to deep injustice in our world. It also does not mean that we cannot acknowledge deep hurt we inflict on one another. The key, James reminds us, is learning how to listen first, how to be thoughtful and caring in our dealings, taking time to discern when to speak, when to act, when to listen, and when to keep our opinions to ourselves.

What the writers point us toward in these two passages is that perfection is not the goal. What matters to God is that we care about each other.

Again, Adam reminds us that when we listen to the Divine Word without allowing it to change the way we treat people, we have not benefited from God’s commands. “Our faith is half-hearted. The integrity of our identity and our self-image depends on truthful, consistent regard for others.”

The letter of James is well known for its stance on faith without works. Here in the first chapter, the argument is set forth with clarity. The writer seems to be saying to their audience, “Who cares if you know the rules by heart? Who cares if your rituals are performed precisely, if you’re so wrapped up in getting things right that you don’t see the person dying in front of you, who is in need of actual care, and love, and attention.

God has given us many gifts and blessings, and yes, God does have immeasurably high standards for us, but God’s standard is not necessarily the

one by which we judge others, or ourselves. What matters most to God is how we share the gifts we have been blessed with, namely, love, mercy, and grace.

We do not share these gifts out of some hope that it will be our golden ticket into heaven. Nor do we do it out of a fear of God's disapproval, but in response to the truth of God's overwhelming love and mercy poured out on us through Christ. In light of this example, we can do no less. We are compelled to embody the gift we have received by showing mercy in turn to others.

One winter Saturday morning, Linda and her family sat at the breakfast table setting out family chores for the day. One of her young daughters was to bring five pieces of wood in from the mud room for their wood stove.

The family went about their work independently, with a plan to go sledding once everyone was finished with their list. Finally, her two girls told their parents that they were all finished and ready to sled, so off they went.

But when Linda's husband was beginning to make the fire that evening, he realized that the wood had not been brought in for the stove.

He confronted their daughter, "You brought in five pieces of wood?" And again, she confirmed she had. "Can you point where the wood is you brought in?" he asked her. She was quiet for a moment and then said, "Oh, well...maybe I forgot to bring them in." And when asked further, she admitted that she had lied.

Linda felt disappointed. While this lie was in the minor league of lies, it still was a deliberate attempt to mislead and avoid responsibility.

How long would it have taken to bring in the wood? How should they respond to this lie? When was the last time that she herself had lied?

Where did that question come from?!

Uninvited, this one question took all of the vitality out of Linda's pointing finger. Suddenly, she was thinking about honesty in her own life.

Oh, dear.

Or maybe not: In that moment, Linda realized she had half a chance to parent with love and compassion, to understand her daughter, rather than simply judging her from a lofty parental pedestal.

It's not that I have been "dishonest," Linda recalled, "It's that I once told my Aunt Millie that I accidentally spilled nail polish remover on the top of her bureau, when in fact I deliberately started applying it to the finish to see what would happen. It wasn't good."

Her memories of lying didn't stop with childhood. On they went, weaving in and out of her relationships for decades. She quickly realized that her own instinct was often to do something sneaky in order to appear innocent, remembering a comic she once saw of a fellow in his nightgown who, kneeling at his bedside with eyes closed and palms together sending up his prayer to the heavens.

"Please Lord, protect me from the appearance of wrongdoing."

"I understand lying" Linda finally mused, "Because I have lied."

All this was not to say that she would ignore her daughter's dishonesty — but that moment of clarity around her own challenges and failings urged Linda to approach her young daughter with compassion and deliver consequences with kindness.

"I know what she's up against," she realized.

The appearance of worthiness can be deceptive. In *Great Expectations*, when Pip is at last ushered into the life of a gentleman through a generous gift from an anonymous benefactor, he believes Ms. Havisham has finally seen something in him worth rewarding, but Pip has misjudged his situation.

You see, as a young boy, Pip did something extraordinary that highlights the call of God to us in this morning's passages: he cared for someone in dire need of help, even at risk to his own personal safety and security.

Abel Magwitch was a recently escaped convict when Pip first encountered the man in the grave yard where his parents were buried. Starved and panicked, Magwitch begged Pip to find him some food, and help him to get out of his prisoner's chains, which the frightened Pip agreed to do.

Even when eventually caught and sent back to prison, Magwitch never forgot the boy's good deed to him and vowed to one day properly thank Pip for his kindness. After years of rehabilitating his life, Magwitch, the lowlife, the convict, amassed a considerable fortune, which he gifted, in its entirety to Pip. While that

strange, rich woman whom Pip had pinned all his hopes on cared nothing for him in the end, Magwitch quietly helped Pip achieve his dream.

God's word to us today is to look with the heart and to listen with open minds, rather than our own judgments. Until we move past our obsession with the actions – and opinions – of our neighbors, we will never be able to achieve God's greatest expectations for us. We must take care in how we treat one other – not just those we approve of or consider worthy – but those whom we think can offer us nothing, and may not make us look good. In doing so, we may find that God has made room even for us, unworthy though we are, to abide in God's holy presence. Amen.