

**Sermon Preached
By Doug King
Sunday, March 21, 2004
Lent IV
Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 15:11-32**

What do you believe you deserve? What is owed to you? What are your expectations from those who surround your life? What are your expectations from God?

Now, considering the fact that we are such a well scrubbed, reasonable, and rational lot of folks, I am sure that all of our expectations about what we deserve are very reasonable and rational. At least that is what we tell ourselves when we are quietly fuming over some situation in which we believe we have not received what we rightfully deserve.

Our gospel text from Luke this morning, the well-known parable of the prodigal son, is all about expectations and what people believe they deserve. We learn a lot about the expectations of these two brothers. Now I must admit that I am under some disadvantage with this story. As an only child I can only look on from afar at the myriad of intricate elements that make up the madness of you all with your sibling relationships. For those of you who are only children, isn't great being the center of the universe? But back to this messy sibling business, it is clear, even to me, that we have some textbook issues going on with these two brothers. The dynamic from a family systems model is fairly straightforward. It is the job of the younger brother to screw things up and be the troubled one and it is the job of the older brother to be the straight and narrow high achiever.

We can see what the younger brother's expectations were. He wanted his piece of the pie as soon as possible so he could get out into the world and live the good life. He was so focused on getting what was his he did not consider the scandal that it was for him to demand his inheritance while his father was still alive. He did not consider the

consequences his actions would have on the rest of the family. He just wanted what was due to him, what he deserved.

It is also clear what the older brother's expectations were. He worked hard. He did everything that was asked of him, heck he was the older brother. He expected to be at the front of the line when it came to his father's affection and attention. He certainly deserved to have a bigger party thrown for him than for his no-account brother who sold off half the family farm and took off leaving him to labor. He was not going to welcome home this brother home with hugs and kisses.

Neither of these brothers make my top ten list of role models but I cannot deny that I can see elements of both of them in me. I would dare to say that most of us can find ourselves in elements of these brothers. Ahh, the lure of expectations, we just want what is rightfully ours. We just want what we deserve, from our parents, from our spouses, from our children, from our work, and from our God. Somewhere in our brains there is a little bell that goes off when we feel we have been shortchanged, when the three year old inside of each of us feels that our piece of the cake is smaller than everyone else's.

Now obviously there are times in our lives when we need to stand up and demand our fair share. Justice issues such as civil rights have required the bravery of folk willing to demand what was rightfully theirs. And in our personal relationships, sometimes we need to share with others imbalances in how we relate together in order for our relationships to grow and become stronger. The dynamic also is also present in our relationship with God. There is nothing wrong with getting angry with God and challenging the ways we feel God has been and not been present in our lives.

Expectations and the expression of them are a natural and normal part of who we are. But they can be debilitating as well. When we let our expectations of the people in our lives become more important than the people themselves we can find ourselves on the outside of the party looking in, filled not with good food and laughter but with rage and

bitterness. The younger brother may have squandered half of the family farm but the older brother ends up squandering something much more valuable, his relationships with his brother and his father. Both of their expectations had entrapped them, the younger son became entrapped in poverty and isolation, while the elder son became entrapped within a cage of his own jealousy. But the younger son repented, he recognized the way in which his expectations had broken him and he returned seeking reconciliation. The elder son shows no sign of repenting, of recognizing how his expectations are serving to harm him. The older son has not realized that by placing his expectations of people above the people themselves he has left himself alone, on the outside, looking in. How long do you suppose he will wait out there letting his expectations keep him from the party?

My friend Patrick shares this experience. "One of the most arresting interpretations of this parable was preached on canvas in oils by Thomas Hart Benton. It hangs in the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. The first time I saw the painting I could not figure it out. I bent forward and read the title, 'The Prodigal Son,' and my breath escaped in a gasp and I was left in my astonishment. Many painters have painted the return of the prodigal, but none like this.

"A man stands by the side of an empty road and scratches his graying beard. Beside him is a suitcase tied together with two pieces of rope. He looks across the road at a house—a home—which long has been abandoned, gray wooden walls collapsing against themselves in a tangle of broken wood, the roof falling in. In one corner of the painting lies the bleached skull and skeleton of a cow: the fatted calf which once would have fed a homecoming feast, now only bones drying under a tortured, unforgiving sky. Benton's prodigal son waited too long for his homecoming. Now there is no home to come home to. We think we have all the time in the world. Not so, says the parable, not so."

Disappointment and anger over unmet expectations in our relationships and our lives cannot be allowed to take away the freedom we have to grow beyond them and find

joy in yet to be expected ways. The younger son has lost his inheritance but he has found his relationship with his father. We can only hope the older son too finds a way to gain something new and valuable in the midst of what he feels he has lost.

In all this therapeutic talk of the two brothers we have given scant attention to the father of this tale. In telling us this story, Jesus is not merely offering some advice about how siblings should relate but about who God is. It is God, in the form of the father, who is the one character in the story who never appears to be trapped by his expectations, neither what he expects of others or what others expect of him. I am sure the father was not expecting his younger son to sell off half of his farm and abandon his family. And I am sure that no one expected that father to go running out into the street to welcome his son home and throw him a party, no questions asked, upon his return. But the father will not let anyone's expectations stand in the way of his love for his son.

God will not be tied down by any expectations, and God's love for us will certainly not be limited by such things. The opposite of the imprisonment of expectations is the freedom of grace. My guess is that God is continually surprised at the vast variety of ways in which we squander our inheritance as the children of God and lead lives that are less than what they could be. But it does not stop God from loving us. God is always anxiously awaiting our return home, ready to rejoice and gather us up in the divine grace-filled arms.

It is not God's expectations that create our distance from God rather it is our own. Sometimes we feel as if we have let God down and do not feel worthy to return to God, fearing how we may be judged. Other times we believe God has let us down, that we have not received what we rightly deserve from God and thus our anger keeps us from returning to God.

Well here is the deal. There will be times in our lives when we screw up and do not live up to God's expectations for us. And there will be times in our lives when we will believe that God has failed to provide us with what we deserve and we will be angry.

We cannot let failed expectations of any sort keep us from our God. Let us not find ourselves in the gray painting of Thomas Hart Benton, looking at the ruin of what may have been. In this Lenten season let us leave behind the imprisonment of our expectations, let us return to God and receive the joyful homecoming that awaits us. Amen.