

Pentecost 21C + October 9, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
2 Kings 5:1-15

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

In recent weeks we have been talking about caring for that which has been entrusted to us, the people of Atonement Lutheran Church. Last week we took a few minutes to share some thoughts on paper about what this church means to you, this precious resource—its history, its people, its legacy; its past, its present, its future. If you were not here last week and would like to add to this, there are extra sheets on the table in the chapel that you can leave on Pattye's desk. Each week I'll be referring to one of them for the sermon, whichever one happens to be on top of the stack, until I run out. So in this sense it will be Stewardship Sunday for awhile.

Stewardship, care of that which God has entrusted to us, has a lot to do with expectations. What do we expect of ourselves and others? What does God expect of us?

From the world's perspective, expectations can often keep us from being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. If you are still thinking that Atonement Lutheran Church does not have a future in this neighborhood, in this city, you may be a prisoner of your expectations. Perhaps long ago you learned to assume that the church would continue to flourish no matter what; that children would regularly take the place of their parents, and grandchildren the place of those children, and down through the generations. If so, you are probably disappointed. Disappointment means failing to fulfill expectations, and left alone it is a dead end.

Consider this from the perspective of people who left this congregation: They too were also prisoners of their expectations. Things they expected to happen, or to find, did not materialize. They expected to feel loved, or supported, or empowered. They were disappointed, and couldn't bear it any longer; that's probably why they left.

Disappointment because of expectations that are not met can cause all kinds of problems. Take the story of Naaman in our first reading today. Naaman is a general under the king of Aram, in Syria. Because of a great victory in battle, Naaman is highly favored by the king. But he has a problem: He suffers from leprosy, a contagious and disfiguring skin disease. He probably tried all kinds of cures with prominent physicians, but a young slave girl captured in one of Naaman's raids holds the key to his cure: Go and see the prophet Elisha in Israel, she says. Imagine how surprised Naaman was to hear this from one of the lowliest in his court.

The king of Aram sends Naaman off to seek Elisha with an expectation that turns out to be problematic: He assumes Naaman has to buy his way to an audience with the prophet. So the king loads Naaman down with huge amounts of treasure: 10 talents of silver, 6,000 pieces of gold, and ten sets of clothing. A "talent" is the heaviest unit of weight in the Bible, equal to about 75 pounds. So how many pounds are 10 talents? Ten sets of clothing is also very costly, because in ancient times each garment took hours of labor to produce, what with shearing wool, harvesting flax, spinning, dying, weaving, and sewing.

But when the king of Israel hears about all this, he tears his clothes in anguish. He seems to expect that Naaman plans to attack his country, using all this supposed goodwill as a cover, so he is frantic. Elisha smooths things over and invites Naaman to come to him.

The crux of the story lies in all the expectations Naaman has of Elisha. The general has come a long way to see this prophet, bearing gifts in ridiculous amounts. He at least expects

Elisha to come to him in person and perform a dramatic healing. But Elisha doesn't come out at all. Instead, he sends a messenger. Then, Naaman is extremely disappointed in what he thinks is Elisha's seemingly simple-minded prescription for his cure, to wash in the Jordan seven times. He expected something a lot more interesting, something like the prophet waving his arms around and calling out to God. Anyway, couldn't he have just washed in his own rivers instead of coming all the way to Israel? The disappointment of all these expectations sends Naaman into a rage.

And who comes to the rescue? Again, the lowliest people present--the servants, just like the servant girl earlier. The reading continues:

But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" So [Naaman] went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

God works in unexpected ways, through unexpected people, to bring life where hope has been lost. And in doing so, God turns worldly expectations and worldly systems upside down. Only when we let go of worldly expectations can God's transforming grace break in. Here at Atonement, we are Lutherans grounded in the great liturgy and music of our worshiping tradition, and nothing will change that. But only when we let go of how things used to be can the Holy Spirit enter in to transform this ministry for God's purpose.

Letting go of expectations in this way is an act of faith. While grace is God coming to us with boundless love and forgiveness, faith consists of us reaching toward God. Faith is the human response to God's grace, and faith is one of the treasures of Atonement Lutheran Church. One person wrote that they are grateful here for "So many faithful folks, so many faith-filled stories that help me when I'm feeling down. Stories of a dying man who smiled and

said to his wife, 'We will be together again with God, soon.' I can only hope to some day have his courageous faith in God."

Our Gospel reading paints a vivid picture of an act of faith. Ten lepers approached Jesus, asked for healing, and were made clean. But nine of them went on their way with no second thought. Only one turned back to praise God and thank Jesus for being healed. The nine were merely made clean, but to the tenth, Jesus said, "your faith has made you well." He grew in his faith.

The stronger our faith, the better we can serve the living Christ through his church. We find our commission at the end of today's second reading, one of my favorite verses: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him," Paul writes, "a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth." Notice how well it complements the mission statement of this congregation: "*We are called by God to serve and witness to all in response to God's grace.*"

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Amen.