

“Great Expectations”

The Joy of Jesus – part #3

Luke 7:18-35

(Copyright disclosure: This sermon has nothing to do with the book by Charles Dickens of the same title.)

[56] Does anyone here remember their very first dance? For me, it was at middle school camp at Lake Louise. I was a bit intimidated – at 12 years old, learning to dance seemed impossible, and I expected I would be terrible at it. True story: my friend, Tierney, and I invented a dance we called the Two-Step-Squish. It goes – step, squish, oops. (The second step involved landing on your partner’s foot.)

I expected my first dance at summer camp to be a total disaster, until my wonderful counselors promised to show us how to dance. Their instruction and encouragement changed my expectations, and as a result, the dance was lots of fun, and no one’s toes were damaged in the process.

[57] It is not too hard to imagine people sitting out of the dance due to fear, depression, and other challenging attitudes. The fact is, in any given situation or problem, our expectations often predetermine the outcome. Go into any bookstore, and you’ll find dozens of titles on the power of positive thinking. It is an accepted idea that if you think anything will be a success before it happens, often it will be. And if you expect failure before you start, and you will more than likely experience failure, if you even try at all.

The past few weeks we have been talking about the joy of Jesus – the idea that Jesus experienced divine joy and wants to share that joy with us. The more we have been talking about this, the more I believe it is the role of the church to help people change their expectations of God and learn to dance.

Not everyone comes to church expecting to dance, literally or figuratively. There have been times we have been disappointed, jaded and disillusioned. Yet according to God’s Word, we, the church, are witnesses to the greatest story ever – the good news, the gospel of salvation in Jesus. Still, last I checked, people weren’t lining up out the door on Sunday morning to hear this good news.

Maybe we need to adjust our expectations, starting with those of us who are here, right now. Maybe we need to expect Jesus to lead us to dance.

[58] God’s word helps us know we are not alone in this quest, as our story today starts with a man who was pretty good at “dancing” with God, at least at the beginning. He was John the Baptizer.

This scripture opens with John asking his disciples to go to Jesus and find out if Jesus was the one they were waiting for, or if they should expect someone else. A little background is necessary to explain why this question was so important and even surprising.

John was part of the original Christmas story, the miracle child of Zachariah the priest and Elizabeth the cousin of Mary. John was born to be a prophet, living in the desert until Jesus appeared. John was a strange character – he wore camel’s hair and ate locusts and wild honey. And he was a fiery preacher. Matthew chapter 3 says that people came from all over to hear him preach and be baptized. Jesus himself was baptized by John. In fact, John first recognized Jesus and sent other disciples to him. (John 1:35)

However, just when things were getting exciting, John criticized King Herod and was thrown into prison. So when we read the lines “He (John) sent his disciples to Jesus,” we have to realize, John himself couldn’t go to Jesus because he was locked up.

[59] Prison apparently didn’t suit John well. This is where he stopped dancing. And in his confusion, his wondering why God was letting all this happen, John sent messengers to Jesus. They asked Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, or should we expect someone else?”

Is that not strange? Shouldn’t John have been the first and foremost of believers in Jesus? Why did John doubt?

Ask yourself, do you ever doubt Jesus? Do you ever wonder if he exists? Wonder if he is God? Wonder if he will come through for you, to release you from whatever prison of despair you’re in? I know I have.

There is good news for us doubters. If John the Baptizer doubted, then doubting has to be normal, even for the “best” Christians.

[60] Jesus gives John’s disciples this answer: “Go tell John what you’ve actually seen.” In effect, Jesus is saying, “No, John, I won’t spring you from prison. Just open your eyes to the big picture of what God is doing. Celebrate, John, despite your circumstances. Don’t stop dancing.”

Jesus did some amazing miracles. Notice that opening the eyes of the blind is highlighted first. That must be intentional. We are so good at only seeing what we expect, what we want to see. Being spiritually blind prevents us from seeing miracles.

Jesus tells the disciples to go back and report what they have seen, what they have heard. Jesus doesn’t have to give them the exact words to say. They already know by what they have experienced.

Sometimes, Jesus rescues us, and that’s great. Sometimes, however, Jesus reminds us of his presence and his promise to be with us to the end. None of us can say what the outcome may be, but all of us can know God is with us.

[61] Jesus may not let John out of prison, but he does offer John high praise. John was not “a reed shaking in the desert” or “a man dressed in fine clothes.” (Luke 7:24-25) No one goes to the desert to see a harmless bush shaking in the wind. John wasn’t a nobody.

Neither was John a pre-packaged celebrity. We get so excited to meet famous people, don’t we? All the glitz, red carpet and flashy clothes. True story: I once shook Charlton Heston’s hand. It was a very cool experience; however, it did not change my life. Jesus says, “Go to the palaces if you want all show and no depth.”

John was somebody unlike anyone else they had ever met. Jesus testifies, John was a real prophet, the last prophet of the old tradition. John was God’s own messenger, sent ahead to prepare the way for Jesus. That is a high compliment, coming from the Messiah.

[62] And then Jesus adds this nugget: the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than John. (Luke 78:28)

In God’s kingdom, normal expectations are turned on their heads. John should have been the G.P.O.A.T. – Greatest Prophet of All Time. Yet John deferred to Christ. (John 3:30) Jesus says, “John was really great.” Then Jesus

claims, through humility and obedience, anyone can be even greater than John. The least in the kingdom has the highest privilege, greater than royalty or prophets. Why? Because in God’s kingdom, status doesn’t matter. Love does.

Not everyone learned to dance at Jesus’ message. The tax collectors, they listened to John, repented and were baptized. They danced to the rhythm of God. But the Pharisees would not. Even though the Jewish leaders saw the miracles and signs, they rejected Christ. They made up every excuse they could think of. “John has a demon. Jesus is a fraud,” they said. They had pre-formed expectations of a different kind of messiah, so nothing Jesus did could ever convince them.

[63] When Jesus saw this hypocrisy, he made an analogy to children in the street playing music. Ever notice, especially with young children, they always want to dance and sing? Most adults, most parents, will humor them and do a round of “Ring around the rosie.” Jesus says, “Look, this generation is like a bunch of fickle children who refuse to sing, dance, cry, or react to anything. Just do something!” (see Luke 7:31-34) No matter what, the people seemed unhappy. Jesus did not have to prove who he was. He would let wisdom and experience speak for themselves. The ones who danced got it.

Does that describe us today? Do we need to change our expectations? If we don’t believe in miracles, how will we ever see one? Will we learn to expect joy in God’s church?

God’s will is for us to dance to the rhythm of Christ. God expects us to call on his name, and to answer, like Isaiah, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8) I love how the Apostle James puts it in his letter. [64]

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (James 1:5-8, NIV)

James says, when we ask, we should expect God to answer. That's hard! But that is the truth. Now, God is not a cosmic vending machine. We don't put in our prayers in a slot somewhere and then wait for the answers to pop out like a candy bar. However, God wants us to listen when we pray, and to ask, "What am I missing here? Have I turned my eyes away? Show me, Lord. I am expecting you to show you like you promised."

[65] A church that learns to dance will encourage others to dance. A church that longs to see miracles will see miracles. A church that expects God to show up will see God. But woe to us if we think we can just go through the motions of the dance and not set our expectations higher than, "I hope there's cookies and coffee after the worship is over."

John and his disciples, despite their circumstances, learned to expect joy. They learned to open their eyes and dance with Christ. By God's Spirit, we can, too.

Let's pray.

Responsive Psalm 30, UMH 762.

Memory Verse: Psalm 30:11 (NIV)

"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy..."

Reflection Questions:

1. When did you first learn to dance? Who taught you? What it easy?
2. Why was John the Baptizer's message so important for the kingdom of God? How do repentance and baptism inform our faith today?
3. Would it have been better if Jesus had released John from prison? Why, and for whom?
4. What miracles do you see in the world today?
5. What "prisoners" are still trapped today? How can the church release them and teach them to dance?
6. Do you wish to become great in the kingdom of God by becoming the least? Reflect on your answer.