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8/7/22—University Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Overall, I was pleased with the elementary school my children attended, with one major exception. Each Spring, the dance teacher would have the students in the school put on a performance of her own creation. The content of the performance was pretty terrible—often some supposedly environmental theme but it was always quite shallow, lacking substance, and even included inaccurate information. I remember one performance centered around saving the cheetahs in the Amazon rain forest. But cheetahs do not live in the Amazon or in rain forests. Cheetahs live on the open savannahs of Africa. This kind of inaccuracy drove me nuts. The underlying message was, “We don’t care enough to get it right.”

But worse still was the performance itself. The children were never well prepared for the event. They didn’t know their lines, they didn’t know the songs, they didn’t know the dances. What took place on the stage was one big confusing muddle. With all the emphasis on scoring high marks on the State standardized tests, the school allotted very little time for preparing the children for the performance.

To make things worse, after the muddled, incoherent performance concluded, the teacher would come on stage and praise the children for this great performance and all their “hard work.”

It made me crazy. Children aren’t dumb. Children know when they have achieved something meaningful after having put in hard work, and they know when they are receiving empty praise. And so the other message sent to the children, along with the message of “we

don't care enough to get it right," was the message: "we don't expect very much from you." We don't expect very much from you.

Lying at the heart of our passage from Isaiah today is the issue of great expectations. In the passage from Isaiah, God is very upset. God is very upset because the people are not living up to the expectations God has for them. In this passage, God berates the people for their worship life. God tell them, "I don't like your rituals, I don't like your sacrifices, I don't like your offerings. In fact, I hate them. These have become a burden to me," God tells the people.

The underlying problem is not what takes place within the sanctuary but rather what is failing to take place once the people depart the sanctuary doors. They people are not living ethically, morally, or justly--which is the purest form of worship we can offer God. And thus, their worship life--all their rituals, all their sacrifices--are nothing but a charade. Their worship is nothing but an empty performance. God watches God's children carry out this ridiculous and meaningless performance and God grows incensed and offended. After all those years watching my own children carry out their own ridiculous and meaningless performance at school, I can kind of relate. The people go through the motions of worship and then expect some kind of participation award for just showing up.

But God has higher expectations of us than just showing up. God tells the people, "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Over and over again in the Bible, we hear God deliver similar expectations upon us. To care for the vulnerable, the weak, the disadvantage is the truest, purest form of worship we can offer God. The Old Testament prophets call us to "do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God." Jesus teaches us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our

neighbor as ourselves. These are among God's high expectations of us. And just showing up, singing the hymns, and listening to the sermon won't cut it for God. God has higher expectations of us.

Now given how busy our lives can become, sometimes we think it would be nice to have someone not expect very much from us. Have you ever been asked to serve on some committee or to volunteer in some way, and found yourself hoping that no one will ask too much from you? At first, we might feel relieved when we discover that no one expects us to do much. But then consider how it feels when you show up for that volunteer activity and there is not much for you to do. Or when you show up for that committee week after week, month after month but nothing is really asked of you and you realize you wouldn't be missed if you never attended at all. And then instead of feeling relieved, we begin to feel unhappy about our involvement. We feel disrespected. Our time has been disrespected. Our talents have been disrespected.

Churches are often guilty of disrespecting people with low expectations. There is a tendency churches have adopted in their efforts to get people to do something in the life of the church. When inviting people to serve as officers of the church, people will often be told, "Don't worry. You won't have to do very much." We may think this way of asking is a lure, a way to get people to agree to service. But it is in fact a sign of disrespect.

We here at UPC have tried to take a different approach when asking people to serve as officers of the church. We have tried to shift to telling people what qualities we've noticed in them that we believe makes them a good leader for that position. And we ask them to consider using those gifts in service to the church. I don't know for sure if those being asked hear the difference in that kind of invitation, but I hope they do.

When people expect something from you, it is a sign of respect. It is a sign that they honor you and your ability to contribute something meaningful.

God isn't some unreasonable boss who takes pleasure in placing burdensome demands upon us. God's expectations of us are actually a sign of deep respect. God believes you and I are capable of doing good things, even great things. By "great things," I'm not talking about saving the world from cancer, although that would be wonderful if you have that ability. But great things are found in small acts of compassion, mundane tasks of caring, the sometimes boring work of justice. Great things take effort. To love those who are unlovable, to forgive, to serve others, to work for justice—these will require effort, struggle, practice, failing, and trying again. But those are God's worship expectations of us, high expectations that honor you and me and our ability to join God in doing what is meaningful.

The communion table is a sign of God's great expectations of us. It is certainly a sign of God's radical inclusion. Here at this Table of love and mercy, everyone is welcome. But it is also a place of great expectations. When Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," he was not just speaking about the ritual of breaking the bread and passing the cup. We don't fulfill his commandment by performing this ritual once a month. That's not the worship he was after. Rather, we fulfill the commandment, the expectation "do this in remembrance of me" when we feed the hungry, share our resources, forgive one another, include the outcast, sacrifice ourselves, and work for justice. Do this, we are told. Live in and live out God's great expectations for you!