

“The Unexpected”  
Luke 6:27-38  
February 24, 2019

Probably most of us have attended a church retreat, or spent a week at camp, or gone to a class reunion. The environment is artificial; it can be electric, and it is short-lived. But somehow out of the short, intensive period of time, participants should be able to take something useful out of it back into regular, everyday life.

One of the things that thrives in such an environment is a sense of camaraderie, or friendliness, among those in attendance. One church retreat I attended threw me in with Congregationalists from all over the world; I had no idea who any of them were except for a small handful from Connecticut and from my home church in Illinois. And yet, while on the campus of Endicott Peabody College, where the retreat was being held, you almost always said a big cheery Hello and smiled when you saw someone else with a tell-tale badge on their lapel or blouse that said I.C.F. - International Congregational Fellowship.

That mood, if you will, carried over for a while, even off campus. Back in the real world, I would still greet anyone I saw on the street, even if I had never seen them before, with a smile and a cheery Hello. That kind of behavior is probably a little easier for a Midwesterner, to be sure. Because some people ignored me, some thought there was something wrong with me - obviously wrong. Still other would reply hesitantly, while a few said Hello right back, smiling away, while it was still apparent on their faces that what had just happened to them - talking to a perfect stranger - was totally unexpected.

As for those who thought there was something wrong with me - they were right. I did not fit in. This kind of Midwestern behavior on the streets of Hartford did not fit in to their preconceived notions of how people should behave. And that included the thought, or so it seemed to me, that people should treat each other as if they were lamp-posts, or parked cars, or fire hydrants.

But for those people who DID respond to a cheerful greeting from a complete and total stranger, they once again showed what educators, and disciplinarians, have known for some time: that if you expect something from somebody, you are more likely to get the kind of results you've been looking for than if you showed no expectation at all. If you demand excellence from a student, yes, some might not be able to fully achieve it, but others will show improved performance than they would have demonstrated otherwise. And, conversely, if you expect little, you will get little.

That sounds a bit like something I bet a lot of us have heard before; it certainly comes from a similar mindset and worldview: "From the one to whom much as been entrusted, even more will be demanded, and from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required." That comes from an old Gospel parable about a servant who has been given charge over much, and is expected to yield back to his master very much in return.

I've heard it said that we know scripture is "true" because when we read it, we see ourselves reflected accurately within its pages. Well, our Bibles this morning are open to Luke's Gospel. Where are we within its pages? Have we been given much? Has the Master entrusted anything to us? What are we to give in return for all that has been put into our care?

Many of us have been given faith. And that faith should be infectious. And I'm not talking just about faith in some mysterious theological abstractions. Those of us here, by and large, have faith in God's people, and in the community God's people have created here at the Colebrook Congregational Church. We should be willing to talk about this - not just to those who already share that faith with us, but to others whom we meet. We should be ready to show what God means in our lives - not just when we pray at table before a meal within the relative safety of our own homes, and not just when we gather behind the closed doors of the church sanctuary, shut off and apart from the rest of the world. Something electric should happen to us in such an environment, in those

relatively short-lived moments. Something should happen to us that should change our behavior on the outside: something that will demonstrate a new reality in our lives.

What reactions might we get should we talk about Colebrook Congregational, why it is here, what does it stand for, and where is it progressing towards? Some may ignore us. Others may think that there is something wrong with us to even mention such matters in public - it is so unexpected. Still others will respond hesitantly. But there will be a few who will respond affirmatively to what they might have not have expected to hear.

What else have we been given? What are we to give in return for all that has been put in our care?

We have been given some rather high standards to aspire to, to live up to, to fulfill. Some people might think it is OK to be just as good as the next guy. I beg to differ. Being just as good as the next guy soon degenerates into the self-justification of the oft-heard phrase, "Well, everyone else does it." We cannot claim for ourselves the advantages and privileges of the faith without also taking on some of its responsibilities and burdens. These may include responsibilities that other people do not share, and burdens that others may not even understand. We are required to fulfill higher expectations than those of the world, higher ideals than those of society at large, higher notions of what it means to be our brothers' keeper. It takes more than keeping your own nose clean, paying your taxes, and tending your yard, so to speak, to be counted among the people of God.

One of my colleagues at the Seminary spends a lot of professional time in Korea. During a foray outside the capital, he noticed a young man, yoked like an ox, pulling a plow which guided by an older man. My colleague was stunned, and asked himself how people could have sunk to conditions so low. But as it turns out, this was a father and son team who had sold their only ox in order to help a neighbor in greater need than they. And so they were happy to work the land like this, happy that they even had had an ox in the first place to sell so that someone even less fortunate than they could benefit.

That too sounds to me like something I've read before: If someone asks you to walk with them for a mile, walk with them for two miles. If someone needs your cloak, give also your shirt. To whom much has been given, much will be expected.

For God is merciful to all, the just and the unjust. As Shakespeare once noted, it rains on all of us, not just on the good. And we are to be like God, loving not just self, but neighbor as well. And we are to love not just neighbor, but also those who are not as neighborly as we might like. True, that kind of behavior is unexpected. It does not fit in with common notions of how "normal" people treat each other. But then, that kind of thinking comes from the idea that if you expect little, you will get little. If you expect injustice, you will get it; if you expected less than love, you will get less than love. And you will be responsible for continuing the endlessly vicious cycle that has produced a world that is largely devoid of compassion and prone to violence.

But there is a way to break that cycle: do the unexpected. Share what you have been given, as people of God. Consider those high standards that have been set for us. And show that we are ready to walk the extra mile, to give of our substance, to work God's will for a world that is worthy of its Creator.

Let us pray: