



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Greater Expectations

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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“In 1994 the New Canaan CT School District hired Bruce Gluck, a classically trained chef (to head) the kitchens of the New Canaan public schools who, for twenty years, served farm-to-table fare before such a label existed. ... His philosophy was “nature provides”—meaning food should be unprocessed, sourced from local sellers, seasonal, and organic when possible. He eliminated junk food from the cafeterias. Canned food went too. He successfully pushed the district to cut ties with the National School Lunch Program. The program boxed him into the Department of Agriculture food pyramid in return for subsidies the wealthy district didn’t need.

“Free to roam, Gluck explored far-ranging culinary fields. Souvlaki, hummus, and quinoa tabbouleh appeared on menus. Pizza took the form of flaxseed crusts topped with freshly made sauce and mozzarella. “I roast the ducks the Chinese way, hanging in the oven,” he told a reporter. “We develop our own recipes here. I use buffalo and ostrich, too.” Vegetables were the real deal: leafy greens, roasted squash. Old standbys slipped in if they could be converted usefully, like chicken fingers made with rice flour to become a gluten-free option. Desserts were low-sugar confections, yogurt parfaits and puddings made with block chocolate and fresh whipped cream.... Gluck pushed his workers hard, demanding that they achieve his formidable vision. The workers were largely immigrant women, many of them Italians for whom English was a second language. Clashes inevitably arose, and when they did, Gluck turned to his second in command Marie Wilson. Wilson knew how to talk to the women; she could explain what he wanted..... (however) according to a federal lawsuit filed by one of the cafeteria workers, Gluck ran his kitchens with a petty tyranny that verged on caricature. He was a culinary artist, a Leonardo of the lunchroom, lashing workers for errors large and small. He would later

laugh, recalling the time a worker attempted to serve cucumber gazpacho hot. But in the moment, mistakes rarely struck him as funny. He slammed doors, threw papers on the floor, pounded a wall, cursed, and called workers “stupid”....(Adapted from Sarah Schweitzer “The Lunch Ladies of New Canaan” published in The Atlantic September 2019)

Regardless of his tyranny, Gluck’s program was a smashing success. Parents came to expect this amazing menu every day. Revenue soared as more and more kids bought these lunches. Everything seemed to be going along swimmingly. Year over year the accounting firm who audited the Towns books commended the school district for its tremendous achievement. Until. Until reports started to emerge from some of these belabored cafeteria workers that Gluck and Wilson were syphoning off cash from the registers. Most of the meals were purchased with school debit cards but about a third came in cash, many thousands of dollars each week. Suspecting something a foot a few of the Selectman persuaded the Town to hire a new accounting firm to audit the finances of the school system. New cash registers were installed that tallied the cash collected which should have matched the drawer after each meal. Cafeteria workers later reported that Gluck, Wilson and Wilson’s sister would pull the drawers away from the cashiers, count the cash and make the cashier sign a different deposit slip for an amount the money less than actually received. Workers reported seeing drawers full of cash in supervisor’s desk drawers. (Ibid, Schweitzer)

The New Canaan Police Department started an investigation and discovered that indeed as much as \$1000 per week in cash was being stolen by Gluck and his management for perhaps twenty years or more. Gluck and Wilson were eventually charged and convicted of fraud. The cafeteria workers, many of them immigrants had saved the day. (Ibid, Schweitzer)

I tell you this story published in this month's Atlantic for several reasons. The first is to illustrate the seductive power of expectations. It was no accident that anomalies in the cash collection at the schools evaded officials for so long. When everything is going well, why question the Goose that is laying the golden eggs. Remember the Housing Boom in 2008? But the other reason I open with this story is because expectations can also lead us towards an honesty we all need if we are to thrive. If workers are being abused (this is Labor Day after all), shouldn't we expect there to be a cause. In other words, shouldn't we question the moral legitimacy of any system that abuses other people, and further link that abuse to other abuses. Expectations can be both negative and positive.

It is a well-known fact that middling wine tastes better when it comes from an expensive bottle. Taste test after taste test will confirm that Trader Joes "Three Buck Chuck" (editorial note here, Traders Joes in California sells generic wine overages under the name Charles Shaw, thus the Chuck) tastes as good as a \$60 bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape. And here's the thing, it actually does. Why? Because our expectation actually effects our palate. Really no kidding. Likewise, if we expect ourselves to fail, we will likely fail. The English championship soccer team is known for its free goal curse. Every time the team is placed into a goal shootout between one player and the goalie, the player misses the goal. Every time. Why? Because the public expects them to blow it. (Chris Berdik, Mind Over Mind: The Surprising Power of Expectations).

It matters how we frame our expectations. A lot. Let's start with ourselves. I never expected to be a minster. In fact, as a young adult I had convinced myself that I would never be very good at public speaking, consequently, I was pretty much tongue tied in front of crowds. Until I met Betty. I owned the only Solar Energy Store in NW Iowa in the early 80's and Betty owned the only Health Food Store. Betty was many things including a rather astute astrologist and hypnotist. Now before you scoff, it was her astrology that led me to begin a mail romance, with real postage letters, with Francis, a thousand miles apart when we had never even met. But that is a story for another day. It was her

hypnosis that changed my life. One summer day, at a party she asked me what my fears were; well, I told her, snakes, Lima beans, roller coasters and oh yeah, public speaking. She convinced me to let her try hypnosis on me and she took me to a new expectation that I would be a great public speaker. Apparently I am very suggestible and lo and behold, it worked. The following week I was scheduled to speak to a local Rotary Club about Solar Energy and I sailed through. I began to expect that I would succeed and I did. Perhaps this has happened to you. Or not. Because just as often we are disappointed despite our greater expectations of ourselves. And that is, forgive the pun, to be expected. The point is that the more often we can expect to do better, the more often we will and if not then we need work. And we all need work, yes? Listen, I was until I about 15 years ago a confirmed pessimist, expect the worst to happen and when it does you are proven right and when it doesn't you are pleasantly surprised. Can you hear me on this?

The point is to try to expect better of yourself and the world. Although this has its limits. We naturally expect certain outcomes, even physically, which limit our endurance. It has been proven, for instance, that Olympic runners begin their runs mentally at the finish line, in other words they subconsciously pace themselves to finish a race often saving their reserves for a sprint at the end. Those that break world records are those who don't save anything. They go all out all the way. (Ibid, Berdik)

We can't always imagine an expected outcome either. When we were selling one home, a buyer stopped out without an agent and explained that she believed as a Christian that God wanted her to have this house and she was going to pay half of what we were asking. Yeah. That didn't work out so well for her. We got our asking price.

Expectations have a dark side. Last week some of us heard Denise Lemoreaux talk about the spiritual causes of addiction. Well it turns out that addictions have everything to do with expectations. But here is the truth: Our expectations of wanting are stronger than our expectations of liking. (ibid Berdik) Addicted gamblers tell researchers that it is the

expectation of wanting to win big that drives them not that they like winning. All addictions eventually surpass liking the high and become wanting, even needing the high. As we gather together in our full strength this month I ask us collectively to consider what we can expect to achieve. If we believe we are destined to fail, then guess what, we will fail. But if we believe, indeed if we have faith that we will succeed then we will succeed. We will exceed our capital campaign goal of \$2 million, we will deepen our faith formation for all of us, especially for the families who will find us and we will reach out in compassion to those in need as never before.

I have heard more than a few of you bemoan our current political reality as a forgone tragedy, no different than Oedipus, who despite his best efforts ended up killing his father and marrying his mother. Yes, we have failed politically and morally. For people of color that failure is all the more real. But admitting failure is the first step to expecting a different outcome. Living with the failure as a new reality keeps us all the more disconnected to one another and beyond repair, morally or otherwise.

Imagine a better way beyond the existential threats of children in cages and planet experiencing a premature heat death. Imagination it turns out actually can change our expectations. There is a lot to fear, but as George Adair says “Everything you want is on the other side of fear.” Baseless hope is a white fantasy, but hope based in signs of reality is worthy of our highest expectations.

Make a plan. In order to consider more we need to expect more. This is the positive dimension of expectations. If we expect others to act generously they generally will. Over the summer the Capital Campaign team and I sat down with some of our donors. We decided a head of time what we thought might be a generous gift and then added a little more. When the time came for the ask, we would ask them if they would consider a gift of so many dollars. Several reactions would then ensue – after the inevitable awkward silence – some would say they could manage that, some would offer a lower amount and

offer more later if possible, some would return with a much lower amount and some would laugh, “thanks of thinking so highly of me”. Far and away though most of tried hard to come up to the ask. In fact, several would come back a few days later and increase their pledge to an amount much closer to the ask. Why? Because they imagined themselves as being a part of something bigger themselves; the creation of this beloved community and the reinvigoration of this magnificent building. Our plan worked because we expected more and we were honest about what we hoped to do, even despite our failings. And believe my beloveds, we as a community have our share of failings just as each of us has our share of failings; diets, spending, anger, and addictions for us personally, the Organ controversy, Sheila Lane and unhappy staff departures for us a congregation. Honesty about who we are leads to a realistic and positive expectation which can result in a plan for success. And successful we are: I am proud to announce that as of today, the early part of our capital campaign has raised \$925,000 nearly half our goal. I expect that all of us will step up to the plate in the coming weeks.

Far and away though, we can only expect something better if we do so together. I have heard from more than a few of you about how despondent you feel about the state of our country. Locking kids in cages as the government is doing at the border and sending critically ill people home to a certain death is about as low as our country has ever been. But consider how much more possible intervention seems when we are together. Our UUSC is partnering with advocacy groups at the border. We are furnishing apartments for refugees from Africa. We are reaching out to communities of color as allies and followers. What we do as a community will and should increase our expectations of a better world.

As the Liberation Theologian and Christian Martyr Oscar Romero put it before he was killed:

“This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that

will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

Let our year of expectation begin.