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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 11, 2019

Proper 14:
Genesis 15:1-6
Psalm 33:12-22
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Living a life of hope

Every year the United Nations does a survey about what the world's happiest country is, based on some metrics they devise. In 2019, they reported that the happiest country in the world is Finland. There are a number of reasons for that that they describe. But I also read a study that suggested a different factor: the Finnish don't have very high expectations of what life is going to be like. As a result, they are pleasantly surprised when things go well and, with enough pleasant surprises, a person can be pretty happy.

You and I know this is true from other contexts. When I expect to see a middling movie, and it turns out pretty good, I'm really pleased. "That was time well spent!" I think. On the other hand, if all I hear is rave reviews of something, that it's the best movie of the century, my expectations are high going in, and it's hard to live up to them. And I'm disappointed. I guess the Finnish expect most movies to be pretty bad.

It may be interesting to note that this is not the tack taken by the Bible. One of the striking things about both Old and New Testaments is that the Bible doesn't want you to lower your expectations at all. In fact, both Old and New Testaments raise your expectations as high as possible. When the Bible talks about the life of the world to come, it doesn't use any qualifications. The Bible doesn't say, "Things are mostly good, but..." Instead, everything that could possibly be promised is promised, and then more.

We see this, for example, in the story of Abraham, in today's reading from Genesis. Out of nowhere, the Lord called Abraham aside and sent him to another country, and promised him an heir. It didn't happen for a while, and Abraham got a little antsy. He got nervous. Should he lower his expectations? He had Eliezer of Damascus, the child of his concubine. Would that be enough? Maybe is that the best God could do? Should Abraham be more like the Finnish?

God said no way. Not only was Abraham going to have a child, but he was going to have more than one; in fact, he would have an uncountable number of children. Look at the stars, God tells him: that's how many your descendants will be.

It's worth noting that that promise was kept. That are something like 15 million Jews in the world, and over two billion Christians, all of whom are descendants of Abraham, as is Jesus.

The Bible raises expectations almost to the breaking point. Abraham is going to have descendants, but that's not the half of it. In the fullness of time, in the Lord's good time, all things will be brought to completion, and the world will be reconciled, to itself and to God, and death, the final enemy, will be destroyed. Don't lower your expectations one whit.

On the other hand, for all of this raising of expectations, in the Bible there is a complete and clear-eyed realism about the world as it is. The Bible has no illusions about what the world is like,

even for those who have God's blessing, and perhaps especially for them. There are no illusions in the book of Job, who is afflicted beyond the capacity of anyone to survive, and seemingly with God's permission. The book of Ecclesiastes shows an elderly King Solomon in near despair. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" In the gospel of Luke, the inbreaking of God in flesh into the world—the Nativity, the Incarnation, Christmas Day—is accompanied in short order by the slaughter of the children around Bethlehem. "Rachel wept for her children and would not be comforted," Luke writes, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, himself writing about another tragic loss.

And, of course, there is the fate of the most blessed man in the world, the man in whom God is well pleased, Jesus himself, falsely convicted of conspiracy and sacrilege, and made to die a criminal's death. You can imagine the disciples on the other side of Easter, trying to explain this fact to others. It would have been difficult. There is a clear-eyed realism to the Scriptures.

There are times when these two things meet: the hope of the Christian, with the darkness of the world. We call those things blessings, and we give thanks for them. We should be pleasantly surprised, like the Finnish. We know what the world is like. When we are blessed, not having deserved it or expected it, that is a cause of celebration and thanksgiving.

As an aside, I think this shows us that there is a difference between hope and optimism. What the Bible gives us is justification for hope of the most unmitigated, unqualified kind. Death will be destroyed. All things will be reconciled. You don't have to be afraid. Because at the end of the day, after night falls, the sun will rise, and every tear will be wiped away. In the meantime, there are no guarantees. And since there aren't, give thanks for your blessings.

Sometimes we have these blessings, in some ways, and other times we don't. The glass isn't always half full. If we were to go to Dayton or El Paso this morning and say it is, that would be grotesque. The Bible isn't blind to the Daytons and the El Pasos. Rachel weeps for her children. What the Bible promises, instead, is the most blessed hope that the world has ever heard, and that is a hope we can hold onto every day of our lives.

From the pages of Scripture, I think we have these guidelines for our lives. First, we should rejoice at the blessings we have. We should rejoice and give thanks that we wake up every morning; give thanks for whoever the loved ones are in our lives; thank God that we have whatever comforts we have. Because, second, we should hold them lightly. They aren't guaranteed. The world is worldly: it always has been. But third: have hope, unmitigated hope. We can have hope because the Lord keeps his promises, and his promises set some pretty high expectations; just ask Abraham. And whatever happens in the course of this mortal life, what is to come will exceed everything we can want or desire.

Therefore, fourth, we don't have to have any fear. This is what Jesus tells his disciples in the opening to today's gospel. He tells them, you can give away your stuff, you can face the lions in the coliseum, and you don't have to be afraid, because the Lord is in charge. In the fullness of time, all will be well. Your highest expectations will be fulfilled, because the Lord keeps his promises.