

Sermon *The Spirituality of Disappointments*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, 9.24.23

Do you remember Voyager 1 – the space probe that was sent out in 1977 to view the planets of the solar system. It's still out there, beyond Pluto. Of course, it didn't take a photo of Pluto because, well, because Pluto is not a planet. Yeah, sorry Pluto, we have some news: you are no longer considered a planet. I wonder if Pluto is disappointed with that.

I bring up Voyager 1 because it has a message from humanity on it. Just in case an extraterrestrial civilization finds it, we wanted an opportunity to introduce ourselves. There is music on board – Beethoven, Chuck Berry, Bach; apparently, they only allowed music in the “B’s” but it’s there for anyone to listen to. I bring this up because it is rumored that two of the scientists wanted to put the phrase, “Welcome to Earth. You are going to be disappointed” somewhere in the information about our planet. I don’t know if they were saying because of the way humans treat other humans or the way humans treat the planet, I don’t know, but, from what I understand, there are some astrophysicists who would like to put a banner up for any extraterrestrial life that when it comes to our unique, blue planet, they should be prepared to be disappointed.

When a child is born – when all of us were born – what’s the first thing we do. Cry. Welcome to earth. There is some wisdom in going through disappointments. Jewish spirituality helps us with disappointments. The Old Testament is full of stories of disappointments. I can’t think of another group of people that have had more disappointments than the people of the Jewish faith. Yet, the good people of the faith keep going with prayers and tradition and bringing the light to the nations. There is a lot we can learn from the tradition about disappointments.

In our three Bible lessons today, and the psalm, we hear about disappointments. From Exodus – the Israelites have crossed the sea on dry land, they are free from oppression; but, they are disappointed. There is no food. It even says that they said they were happier when they were oppressed because at least they had meat in their pots to eat! They were disappointed with Moses and with God. Moses was disappointed with them; maybe with himself and, maybe with God too.

The psalm for today: *I will sing praises to my God while I have my being; put not your trust in rulers nor in any child of the Earth, for there is no help in them. When they breathed their last they returned to the Earth and then that day their thoughts perish.*

That sounds like someone who has been disappointed with their rulers or with “any child of the earth”. It ends with this: *Happy (or blessed) are they who have the God of Jacob for their help whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

This is part of the Jewish wisdom with disappointments – happy is the one whose hope is the Lord their God and not in human beings or of the princes or rulers of the earth. Another way to

look it is this: unhappy will be the one who sets their hope on rulers and those in charge. In other words, welcome to earth.

Speaking of trusting rulers and people in charge, the Letter to the Philippians has disappointment in it. St. Paul started the church (most likely) and is now writing to them while he is in prison. They are discouraged – disappointed – that he is in prison and has not visited them. Also, people in their own community are getting in legal trouble for following Christ. This is a BIG disappointment. Were they thinking that if they followed Christ all would be fine for them – no sickness, no sadness, no disappointments? Paul is writing to them as if they are, or were, thinking that. We will hear later about the wisdom of faith and what to do in the face of disappointment. I'll get to that in a moment, but, I want to talk about our Gospel lesson.

In the parable Jesus told, there is a vineyard owner who paid the workers that started at 5 pm the usual daily wage for working all day. The workers who started at 9 am were excited that they'd get more. But, they got paid the same wage that they agreed to in the morning. They were understandably disappointed. Welcome to earth. It's full of disappointment. Jesus is telling this story for anyone who has ever been disappointed.

Speaking of disappointments, the president of the National Associate of Episcopal Schools wrote that one of the gifts an Episcopal education can, or should, give is the ability for our students to deal with disappointment. He wrote that most of our students are privileged; most of them have not experienced the same disappointments that other people in their county or their city have learned to deal with. If we don't teach our students how to deal with disappointment, they will graduate behind the other students in their region. He went on to explain how Episcopal school educators can use the opportunity for disappointment as a good learning experience – one that will help shape them for life (welcome to earth).

The El Paso School District was given such an opportunity. They had students take the SAT as normal; but, the UPS truck that carried their paper tests (yes, they still use paper) was involved in an accident and their tests were scattered across a busy Texas highway. The school district had to do two things: inform the 55 students that their tests were destroyed and give them the opportunity to take it over again. But, the district, using the wisdom of disappointments, asked the students to reflect on these questions: if you choose to retake the test, what is your strategy and how is it different than the first time you took it? Do you see yourself performing better or worse with this opportunity?

Moses, and God, and the Israelites – what is your strategy, how do you see yourself performing better or worse? The opportunity came upon the assembly to learn to trust God. In the evening, God sent quails to eat. In the morning, there was a dew, sticky like substance that they could eat. Calories in the morning to get through the day; protein at night to refresh the body. Did they do better in their faith or worse? The story points to them doing better in their faith with the opportunity that this disappointment gave them.

They say there are three types of disappointments: preferences, ego and values. A preference disappointment is when you go to the ice cream shop with your grandchild and they do not serve Vanilla bean ice cream; just regular vanilla. There is a disappointment with that. I have a friend from college, Rick, who loves French toast for brunch. We went out – Christi, he and I and some other friends – for brunch and he ordered French toast. He asked for the powdered sugar on the side. The server said they do not have powdered sugar. He said, “You mean there is no powdered sugar in the entire restaurant!?” The answer: no, we only have syrup. Rick ordered it anyway and fumed about it all during the meal, and afterwards, and frankly, it was twenty years ago and we still remember the story. That’s a preference disappointment.

The next category has to do with disappointment of the ego – either someone let you down or you let yourself down. This is the hardest one. The Israelites preferred to eat. Moses, however, may have blamed himself and/or God for their hunger. The ego disappointment is one of the hardest especially if you let yourself down.

The last category is values. If you value kindness and someone treated you unkind that action creates a disappointment. If you value love and someone did not love you back, that’s a disappointment. If you value equality and fairness and you are treated unfairly or unequally, that also creates a disappointment. If you value trust and friendship and were not shown those values, or were betrayed or lied to, it makes for a deep disappointment.

The laborers in Jesus’ parable had a value of being paid for work and were disappointed to find out some who worked only an hour got the same wage as themselves. It was a value-disappointment. With the church in Philippi, Paul, who undoubtedly was disappointed that he was in prison and disappointed that he heard about people falling away from the faith. Paul had to work through his own ego-disappointment and his own values-disappointment in order to write this letter of encouragement.

Each one of these disappointments – preferences, ego or values – each one, spiritually speaking, provides an opportunity to learn and to rejoice. I know; it’s the last thing that someone dealing with a deep disappointment wants to hear – there is something to learn here and something to rejoice – but, it’s in our spiritual DNA to reflect on it. The laborers – hired in the morning – were given the opportunity to reflect on the generosity of the landowner and to rejoice with those who were not hired until late. The Philippians were given the opportunity to rejoice in the suffering of Paul, and others, because they were following the Way. And, for each of them, individually, it gives the opportunity to reflect on their faith, on their values, and to continue to live in the way that resembles Christ.

I was sent to Saint John's K-through 8<sup>th</sup>-grade School and Church. It was in receivership with the diocese which means they couldn't pay their bills. The bishop told me to simply turn it around or prepare the buildings and land to be sold. As time went on things started to get better but the school was starting to show that it couldn't stand on its own; it couldn't support itself without intervention from the church and diocese. Both of those avenues had closed as supports

otherwise the school could have dragged both the church and diocese down. As such, it was made clear to me that it was time for the school to close. It was a preference that I did not want - disappointment. I felt as if I had to let everybody in the school down – ego disappointment. And it greatly disrupted my values with how I saw the diocese and how they respond to people in crisis.

What is there to reflect on with this three-part disappointment. One of the biggest lessons was re-evaluating relationships. I re-evaluated my relationship with the diocese, with my own strengths and weaknesses, and with my ego of wanting the school to succeed at all costs. (My preference for the school to stay the same was, after all, more about me than about good pedagogy and theology.)

But there is more to it than just that. There was more reflecting and spiritual work to be done because I was disappointed with God. Through a couple of dreams, or visions that happen at night, God healed me from my disappointment. The best I can describe it is like this: I was carrying a shell – not just any shell, but the type that carries a pearl inside. The shell was so large, like a heavy school backpack, that I clutched it in my arms and held it to my chest. The weight of the shell made it so I walked slowly – differently/labouringly. It took so much from me to carry it that I could not use my hands for anything else and, I don't know if you have ever felt this before, but, it was so heavy I had a hard time hearing anything other than my own exertion to carry it. God appeared to me like the loving arms of a mother. I will refer to the Lord from here on out as “she” because there is no other way I can describe the encounter other than with the love and nurturing a mother has for her child. She held me as I was holding the shell. I was shaking; she was calm and reassuring. She asked, “What are you carrying?” I said it was a shell. She asked, “What is inside it?” I said I don't know, it's too heavy. She said, “Set it down.” I said I can't. But, as she was holding me, I slowly set it down into the water. The shell opened and inside was the ego, the preference, the values I have around the school and the diocese and myself. It was all there, in the shape of a child. I picked up the child back into my sore arms. She asked, “Why are you feeding this child?” I didn't say anything. She said, “Why are you nursing this child? Why have you not set it free?”

I looked down, I was standing in was a shallow and wide river. The river water held light like a rainbow or kaleidoscope that kept changing and shimmering in beautiful color as the water rippled and swirled around my legs. The Lord is holding me, I'm holding the child, the water is flowing all around us. God said, “Set the child free; let the child swim.” So, reluctantly, I set the child down in the warm water. The child started to swim and it looked much happier than when I was clutching it. The child swam away off into the swirling colors of the river. The shell disappeared. I was left being held in the arms of my savior. The second vision/dream is of God holding me and quietly whispering to me that she has something better for me. I felt something in my hand and it was another shell. I set that in the water. I had shells in my pockets and sometimes they would appear in my hand; they kept appearing and I kept placing them in the water. One by one they disappeared. One by one my disappointments disappeared; and God said each time, “I have something better for you.”

We cried when we were born. It was a way to welcome us to earth. I don't think we have a banner on the moon, or in the Voyager satellites that says to be prepared for disappointment; we don't need to because we have enough reminders on earth as it is. We also have God who is holding and embracing and saying *I love you, I am with you, I have something better for you* in the midst of our disappointments.

God also gives us the opportunity to learn from disappointment and to grow spiritually. Back to the Letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote: *most importantly, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel*. Living the Gospel is to do something better than how you're being treated when you have values and those values are not being upheld by others. The call from God to us is continue in the way that you are if you value love, and somebody's not showing you love, continue with your own love which may lead to a re-evaluation of that relationship. If you value kindness, and somebody's not showing you kindness, continue in doing kindness and don't become like them.

*Live together a manner worthy of Christ's gospel; do this so that you stand firm united one Spirit as you struggle together; you are having the same struggle that you saw me face and now here that I'm still facing.*

The church is a place for us to be able to share disappointments. It's a place for us to see that the struggles we are going through is similar to the struggles others have been through. And, it's a place for reflection on the spiritual side of disappointments. Church is where we can gently and quietly ask ourselves what opportunity is here for us to learn. What is God teaching us? It's also a place to stand firm in our own values even as we see other values around us falling. It's a place where God encourages us and, like the laborers who started work at 5 pm, with the adversity and anxiety of not find a job, like the vineyard owner, God comes to us – who are all the 5 pm workers – and says, *I have something better for you*.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen