

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Exceeding Expectations”
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Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 23:1-12

So this is the moment where everybody gets a little nervous. The pastor’s final sermon. What will she say? Given the opportunity to say one last thing, what hidden truth or secret grudge or honest confession will be revealed?

Set your minds at ease, friends. You’ve heard all I have to say, many times over. As the wise Teacher of Ecclesiastes said, “there is nothing new under the sun.”

But that doesn’t mean I plan to bore you all today with a re-hash of past messages or a generic Hallmark card farewell. You’ve taught me better than that.

The late Rev. Dr. Hank Borchardt used to give me a grade on each of the sermons I preached here. And I’m generally one who likes grades. I like to know where I stand in others’ esteem. I like to know what I need to work on and improve. I really like to get all A’s.

Which is why I was totally thrown when I got my son, Dean’s, first report card from school. There were no letter grades. Birmingham Public Schools had transitioned to “standards based progress reports.” In the place of A’s, B’s, and C’s, the students received numbers representing their progress toward the expected standards. In each category, a student might be “approaching expectations,” “meeting expectations,” or, my personal favorite, “exceeding expectations.”

Now, it took me a while to make heads or tails of this grading system. But eventually, I came to appreciate it. I like that it describes student progress in terms of expectation rather than achievement. This grading system rewards effort and mastery. It discourages competition for top grades and the shame associated with failing grades. The worst you can do in standards based grading is “needs improvement.” Well, who doesn’t? I can get behind a kid needing improvement more than a kid who is FAILING.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, I’m pretty sure Jesus is saying the Pharisees “need improvement.” And he gives a detailed list of the improvements he’d like to see. Practice what you preach. Serve the people, carry their burdens, do your own work. Develop some humility.

Now, Pharisee literally means “separatists,” and the group dates back to the Maccabean Revolt. They “exceeded expectation” in living counter-culturally, practicing the faith in every aspect of daily life.

Jesus even compliments their teaching, their doctrine, and encourages people to do as they say. But there’s that common corollary: don’t do as they do.

The Pharisees will accept nothing less than straight A’s, but they don’t offer any tutoring or homework help. They shame and blame; they say one thing and do another; they make demands of their followers that they themselves shirk; and they exalt themselves wherever they go and make everyone else feel like failures.

And on the one hand, I can see their logic. They felt the best way to uphold standards was to raise them, even if they could not be met by everyone. In seminary, our professors told us they were going to assign

more reading than they actually thought we could do, and that they were going to hold us responsible for knowing all the material in that reading. This was frustrating, yes, but it pushed us beyond our own expectations.

But Jesus says, don't give into the shame and blame, the competition and self-aggrandizement. As Danny Beale used to say, "Don't be that guy."

Instead, be humble, be teachable. There's a different standard, a different expectation, for Jesus followers.

School may be out for the summer, but we've still got a lot to learn. There are no letter grades – A's and B's and F's. But there is an expectation, set forth by our one teacher, Jesus the Christ. To meet this expectation, the Apostle Paul writes a beautiful curriculum for us to follow in that hymn from his letter to the church in Philippi.

"Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Now, you all have some major decisions ahead of you. Staffing, programs, budget, vision. All these things are going to come up in the next few months. And it's going to be difficult to get 869 people to be in full accord and of one mind about any of them.

But the expectation is that love will unify and strengthen you. I can tell you from ten years of ministry here that when you all choose to let love guide and direct your thoughts, words, and actions, there's nothing you can't do to the glory of God. Try to exceed expectations in loving one another, and you will find unity and harmony in your decisions.

Paul also says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." All of us have suffered at times from the judgement culture that is so prevalent in this community. We judge those who travel too much for work and those who don't get promotions and those who don't work enough or don't work at all. We judge homes that are too big and ostentations and homes that aren't maintained to our standards. We judge parents who hover and parents who don't. We all do it. It is just in the water here.

But the expectation for us Jesus-followers is that we will be humble and kind and compassionate and generous. We will accept and value the way others choose to live, and work, and parent, even if it doesn't meet our standards. We will help our neighbors before they can help themselves. We will admit when we need help ourselves.

Perhaps if we judge the world around us by God's standards instead of our own we will see how all those people and places and situations we viewed as deficient are actually exceeding expectations when it comes to the progressing toward the kingdom of heaven.

Finally, Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross."

This is an expectation of radical equality. If one who is divine can put himself on level with humanity, who are we to say we're better than anyone or anything in creation?

This is also an expectation of profound comfort. God chose to self-limit, to empty out, in order to stand alongside humanity, in all our suffering and distress. God in Jesus Christ took on the form of a slave –

someone with no rights, no power, no identity. God stands in solidarity with the voiceless, the invisible, the marginalized, and the oppressed. And we are expected to do likewise.

And finally, this is an expectation of obedience and self-sacrifice. We all like to imagine Jesus is the Great Therapist, helping us work through our problems and function better in the world. Or a Fairy Godfather, granting our wishes for health, wealth and happiness. But let's not forget that the One we follow leads us to a cross. Sure, there's resurrection on the other side. But first there's a cross. And we're expected to follow him there.

Jesus told his followers they have one teacher: the Messiah, Jesus. Well, we are the Body of Christ here in Birmingham, MI, and I am grateful that you have taught me so much and so well. I'm grateful to Hank, and many others in this congregation, who gave me feedback, even grades, that have helped me to learn and grow over the last ten years.

But I have not been in ministry alone here. We have been in ministry together all this time. I am, to a certain degree, the pastor you have helped mold and equip me to be. And so I want to take this final opportunity to offer a report card, a standards based progress report, on our ten years of ministry together.

I'll begin by saying that, in every way, this call has exceeded my expectations.

First of all, the challenges of this call have exceeded my expectations. This has been so much harder than I ever could have imagined. It started out rough in an interim period with a sanctuary renovation and economic recession thrown in for fun. I've grieved the loss of people we loved. I've gotten frustrated and angry and possibly threw a Bible across the room once. I've stayed up all night playing laser tag, which sounds like fun until you hit a wall at four a.m. and one kid is punching people and another one is puking.

But the hardest thing I've ever done in ministry is this. I could not have imagined how difficult it would be to leave this place. Yes, the challenges of this call have exceeded my expectations.

But the blessings of this call have also exceeded my expectations. Through those challenging situations, I have learned and grown so much. I've grieved because I've loved you all. I've gotten frustrated and angry because we have wrestled about things that really matter.

You've celebrated all my accomplishments and shown grace in the face of all my faults. We have innovated and experimented and created marvelous things together.

You have encouraged me to be not only the best pastor I can be, but also the best mother and wife and friend. We've swapped parenting advice, mulled over difficult life decisions, and just had fun being together.

There are simply not enough words, and there is not enough time, to express all the ways the blessings of this call have exceeded my expectations.

Yes, you have exceeded my expectations – and now I encourage you to go and exceed your own. Love more deeply and daringly than you can imagine. Serve more joyfully and authentically than you think possible. Pour yourselves out until you think you've hit empty, and then keep going until you are completely drained and all that is left is a glorious emptiness, a space filled with God.

You are Everybody's church. And I am grateful that you have been my church. Thank you. To God be all glory forever. Amen.