



Central Peninsula Church

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What Did You Expect?

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

Never underestimate the significance of expectations.

Sometimes our expectations are too low. In 1972 NASA launched a space probe called Pioneer 10. Its mission was to reach and take photographs of Jupiter. This was a bold plan because no probe had ever gone beyond Mars. But Pioneer 10 exceeded all expectations. Jupiter's powerful gravity hurled it toward the edge of the solar system. At 1 billion miles from the sun it passed Saturn, at 2 billion miles it blew by Uranus, and then at 3 billion it swept by Neptune, and then at 4 billion it passed Pluto! Twenty-five years later in 1997 Pioneer 10 was 6 billion miles from the sun and still beaming back radio signals to earth that scientists could use. Not bad for a device that was designed to have a useful life of only three years! I'd say in that case expectations were a bit too low.

But sometimes expectations are too high. Yesterday was the NFL draft. Most people expected Notre Dame's QB, Brady Quinn, to be one of the first three or four players picked. ESPN was so sure of this that he was one of just a handful of guys they invited to the draft so everyone could see his reaction when chosen. But when they got past the tenth pick and Brady was still waiting to be picked, they decided to escort him to a private suite to avoid further embarrassment. When he was finally picked at #22 everyone knew expectations had been way too high.

Expectations are important as it relates to following Christ and being part of the church. When people see the sign, "Central Peninsula Church meets here" out in front of this building, what kind of expectations do they have when they enter? Are they too high or are they too low? What should we expect to experience when we enter a church or even decide to become a follower of Jesus? Something that will last about three years? A "one hour" solution to our problems?

This morning I want to talk about what we can expect as a community of people who try to follow Jesus Christ. I want us to look at a story out of the life of the early church that resets our expectations.

The story is found in Acts 9. It takes place as the gospel is spreading from Jerusalem to the outer regions of Judea. The church is just beginning to deal with the possibility that God is reaching out beyond the Jews. That's nothing new to us, but it was a new concept to them. Peter has come to the town of Lydda, about 25

miles northwest of Jerusalem. From there he will move about 11 miles NW to the coastal city of Joppa. Listen to what happens.

"Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed.' Immediately he got up. And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, 'Do not delay in coming to us.' So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, 'Tabitha, arise.' And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon" (Acts 9:32-43).

I. The Reality of Living in the World.

I don't know what Peter expected to run into in Lydda and Joppa. He's out visiting churches. He's hanging out with believers in both Lydda and Joppa. And what does he find?

First, he finds paralysis. For eight years it held Aeneas in check, unable to fulfill life as God intended it to be lived. We can assume he'd become a Christian, yet he was still paralyzed. I'll bet that's something he never expected do have to deal with.

By the way, paralysis can happen in different ways. Some of you are suffering from paralysis of the will or of the spirit. There are things you've been wanting to

do, knowing that you ought to do them. For years you've been saying, "Oh, I should do that. I'd like to make that change in my life in this way or that way." But you never have. That's paralysis of the will. We can expect to encounter this kind of paralysis in the church and even in our own lives from time to time. It would be so nice if we could tell people to follow Jesus and all your problems will go away. You'll change overnight. All your old habits and battles will be gone. But it doesn't work that way. Sometimes for years we still have to deal with stubborn vestiges of the old life that won't go away.

But then he goes up to Joppa and what he finds there is even worse. He finds death, along with the grief and the deep sense of loss that goes with it. A woman named Tabitha has died. Luke makes a rather big thing out of her name. He tells us that her Aramaic name was Tabitha. But he also tells us that the Greek translation of that name was Dorcas. Now this name Dorcas was not a derogatory term like we might think; if someone calls you a "Dorcas" today you might take offense. But back then "Dorcas" meant "gazelle." A gazelle, of course, is an animal, and in the ancient world it embodied grace and beauty. Luke makes special note of her name because he wants us to know that Tabitha was this kind of woman. She was a woman of grace and beauty, particularly because of her deeds of kindness and charity.

Notice that her loss was felt particularly by these widows. In the ancient world, widows were the most helpless and dependent of people. Tabitha had ministered to their needs, but now she was gone. Death has a way spreading its wings and casting a shadow much larger than just one person. It often leaves people grieving and in need. Now remember, these are disciples; these are believers. It would seem that we can expect that from time to time death and grief and loss will be a part of what we experience as disciples of Jesus.

So you might say the message here is, don't expect too much. When you become a follower of Christ you cannot expect a quick fix to all your problems. You'll face paralysis. You'll encounter death and loss and grief. A big part of the Christian life is surrendering to God in the midst of circumstances we would have never chosen.

But you can expect too little as well. As I look at this story, I see three things that set the bar very high; three things that are beyond Jupiter; three things we should dare to expect as followers of Christ.

II. The Communion of the Saints.

The first thing is what I would call communion of saints. That sounds awfully religious, and I don't mean it to be. But in this passage Luke

twice calls ordinary believers "saints" (vv.32,41). It's just Luke's term for ordinary, run of the mill followers of Christ. But in this story, we see an unusual kind of communion and fellowship among the saints.

As we've seen, Peter came to Lydda because Tabitha had died. She's described as one who was "*full of deeds of kindness and charity.*" Later in the story we see specifically what she did. She sewed garments and gave them to widows. The early church took seriously the responsibility to support those widows who had no one else to help them. Tabitha knew that and she used her gifts with a needle and thread to meet their needs for clothing.

Luke tells us that this wasn't something she did once in a while when she had time or when she felt like it. He says she was "*abounding*" in this work "*which she continually did.*" He didn't have to say that, but he wanted us to know that not only did she think about it, she DID it. This was a lifestyle for her. She didn't just do it at Christmas. She did it continually. This was her ministry. This is a picture of the communion, the fellowship, the interdependence of the saints. You see it in the bond that existed between these widows and Tabitha. She was a woman who had the means and the skills and the time to help those in need; she was likely in a different social class, yet their hearts were knit together.

The communion of saints always expresses itself in deeds of kindness and charity. It knits people together who wouldn't normally be seen together. I'll be honest, it doesn't happen much here as we gather together on Sunday mornings for worship. It happens as you leave this room and go out into that lobby and into your homes and communities. It happens in the phone calls you make, the small groups you meet with, the notes you write. When someone reaches out to you and meets a real need your heart is connected to them forever. My heart is connected to the Deboars because when Lynn and I were lonely and awkward newcomers in a church in Denver they reached out to us and invited us to be in their small group. My heart is bonded to people who wrote me notes when my mother died, which I still have. My heart is knit to the folks at Valley Community Church because when we couldn't afford one they pitched in to buy us a furnace in the thick of winter.

Last Thursday we had Steve Stenstrom speak at Men's Fraternity. He told the story of how God called him to take Stanford students and get them involved in meeting needs in East Palo Alto. He heard about a woman named Dorothy Conner who suffered from diabetes and was in a wheelchair because both her legs had been amputated. When they met her at her house they noticed that her knuckles were raw because the hallways in her house were too narrow for her to pass through without scraping them. Steve and his team went to work in her house and kind of did their own version of "Extreme Home Makeover." Dorothy was so grateful. She died seven months later and Steve was one of four people asked to speak at her memorial

service.

Deeds of charity and compassion knit us together in love and have always been a mark of true Christianity. Few people realize it but before the coming of Jesus Christ there were no hospitals in the world, there were no orphanages, there were no relief organizations. The Christian faith was instrumental in the development of all these things.

When you become a follower of Christ and enter into the family of God, you can expect to become a part of the communion of saints, both as a giver and a receiver of deeds of kindness and charity.

III. The Operation of the Holy Spirit.

But that's not all. There is a deeper and underlying matter at work here, of which the communion of saints is the fruit. It's the operation of the Holy Spirit. It's interesting that the Spirit isn't even mentioned here, but the marks of the Spirit ooze from this story.

First, we see evidence of the Spirit's operation in the guidance of Peter. He comes to Lydda for a reason that's not stated. He then goes down to Joppa because of an emergency—a disciple has died. But then the passage ends with this curious statement about Peter staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner. Understand that Jews considered tanners unclean and off-limits because they had to handle the skins of dead animals, and that was against Jewish laws. Peter was Jewish, so this had to be a bit uncomfortable for him. But when you consider what happened to him next you can see why the Spirit had him there.

Chapter 10 is one of the watershed chapters in all the Bible. It's about how God revealed to Peter that the Gospel is for Gentiles and a Gentile named Cornelius is saved. The Spirit tells Peter, "what God has called clean, no longer consider unclean." Being at Simon's house prepared him for that. So the Holy Spirit led Peter each step of the way, but he was doing so through natural means; through ordinary events. That's how he most often leads in our lives. We go about our lives, doing what seems right, responding to needs, not always knowing for sure why we're here or there. But the Spirit is in charge of our lives. He's working behind the scenes. There are things he's setting the stage for that you cannot see, but it becomes clear as time goes on.

I remember about 25 years ago, when I was an intern at PBC, Lynn met a young girl who was from Foster City. She invited us here to meet some of her friends, and eventually we started a little Bible Study up here. Now we didn't know Foster City from Milpitas. But it opened up a whole new area to us. About a year later I met a guy named Steve Farrar, who was pastoring this little church in Foster City that met in the Community Center. They needed another pastor so I applied for the job. They didn't hire me, but I became aware that there was this church

there. A few years later I was working at a church in Pleasanton and we needed a retreat speaker, so I suggested this guy named Jeff Farrar, who I'd heard replaced his brother at that little church in Foster City. The weekend of the retreat, Lynn and I were just about ready to move to Denver for Seminary and Jeff said to me, "When you're done, give me a call. We might be ready to hire someone!" A couple of years later I gave him a call and this time they hired me!

Never once in that entire period did I hear the Spirit speak directly to me. But, do you know what? He was leading. That's one of the things we can expect. We can expect the Holy Spirit to orchestrate the common events of our life to accomplish his purpose.

We also see the operation of the Spirit in another way. We see it in the exercise of different gifts. In 1 Cor. 12:7 Paul says, "**To each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**" Later he says the Spirit "**distributes to each one as he wills**" (v.12). Here in this passage we see an illustration of that. We have Peter with these amazing gifts of healing and miracles. Paul talks about those gifts in 1 Cor. 12:9-10. But toward the end of that same chapter he talks about another gift, called simply the gift of "helps" (v.28). That gift is seen here in Tabitha. The gift of helps literally means the gift of relief. When Tabitha used her deft fingers to make a sweater or dress, she was doing it in the power of that gift which the Holy Spirit had bestowed on her. No less of the Spirit was manifested through Tabitha than through Peter. In 1 Cor. 12 Paul says we're a body, and in the body, "**If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it's not for this reason any the less a part of the body'**" (vv.15-16).

When you become a follower of Christ and enter the church of the living God you can expect to be bestowed with at least one gift. It's no use wondering why the Spirit made someone else an eye and you a foot. You're to use that gift to serve the body of Christ. And you'll find in the exercise of that gift joy that exceeds expectations.

IV. The Manifestation of the life of Jesus.

But there is still one more thing. We've moved past Jupiter and Saturn; now we're getting on to the outer limits of the solar system. The third thing we should expect to experience is nothing less than the life of Jesus.

In both miracles it's clearly not Peter but Jesus who is at work. I love what Peter said to the paralytic, "*Jesus Christ heals you.*" And just as Jesus had said to a paralytic in Capernaum, "Get up, take your mat and go

home," so Peter said to Aeneas, "Get up and make your bed." We see the same thing in Joppa. The whole story is told in a way that's reminiscent of how Jesus raised up Jairus' daughter in Mark 5. Jairus had begged Jesus to come and help his daughter just as these two men entreated Peter to come and help Tabitha. Jesus met up with weeping woman when he arrived at Jairus' home; so did Peter. Jesus sent people out of the room; so did Peter. Jesus said to the girl, "*Talitha, arise!*" which means, "Little girl, arise!" Peter said, "*Tabitha, arise!*" Only one letter separates these two commands. And Jesus took her by the hand and raised her up just as Peter took Tabitha's hand. The only real difference in the two stories is that Peter knelt down and prayed while Jesus didn't. That's because he wasn't Jesus; he was depending on Jesus. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, not Peter.

And he is today! The powerful life of Jesus is still at work in the church. We should expect nothing less! But how do we experience the life of Jesus today? Is it by seeing people raised from the dead like Tabitha? The fact is that a day would still come when Tabitha would get old and die. I don't think the Lord did this for Tabitha. She was better off in heaven. I think he did it to bring about a different kind of miracle. You see, the greatest miracle of all is when people, who by nature have no interest in God, begin to show signs of spiritual life. That's why when Peter says "Get up" he uses the same verb used of God raising Jesus. These miracles are a sign of the new, resurrection life we have in Christ. When our heart is awakened to the love of God, that's resurrection power at work! Throughout Acts, that's always the purpose of miracles—to show that the message the apostles were preaching about Jesus was true and to bring people to faith in Him. And we see that this message got across. Verse 35 says all who lived in Lydda and Sharon "**turned to the Lord.**" Verse 42 tells us that as a result of what happened to Tabitha "**many believed in the Lord.**" We should expect to see this all the time in the church. We should expect to see the life of Jesus at work, resurrecting people to eternal life.

So here in this story we see that the gospel is continuing to spread. From Jerusalem it has spread north to Samaria and into Damascus. It has spread into Ethiopia and Arabia. And now it is spreading west to the coast of the Mediterranean. That's what the gospel does; it spreads. It's like perfume. If you take the stopper out of a perfume bottle, the smell will spread through the room. You can't stop it. If you take the gospel out into the world, it will always

spread.

CONCLUSION

As you think about what it means to be a servant of Christ in this world, don't expect too much. You live in the world. There are going to be struggles, there are going to be battles. Nothing can change that. But don't expect too little. Look for the sweet communion of the saints. Cultivate it continually by engaging in deeds of kindness and charity. Look for the operation of the Spirit. Surrender to him as he guides you and gifts you. And look for the life of Jesus at work, conquering spiritual death, resurrecting people like you and me to new life.

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