

Things seldom go the way we expect. We know this intellectually, but time and again, we end up with expectations at the extremes, while the world proves to be a shockingly moderate place. The wildest dreams and darkest fears of those reacting to the news almost never come true. There's nothing wrong with having strong reactions — sometimes they are entirely warranted — but I wish people would maintain a sense of perspective when they speculate on what will actually happen next, and more than that, would focus on what God is calling them to do, or even to sacrifice. World history has had its ups and downs, but neither utopia nor armageddon has happened yet, probably because human beings aren't powerful enough to make them happen on our own. Managing expectations is hard work.

Jesus's arrival in a new village was big news, and often unwelcome. While it's true that hospitality was and is a very important part of Middle Eastern culture, it's also true that outsiders to a village were often viewed with suspicion. An extreme example would have been when Jews visited Samaritan villages. Samaritans were the descendants of the Jews who, centuries before Jesus, had not been deported from Israel by the Babylonians, and the foreign peoples who had been settled there by the Babylonians. Samaritans, who are still around today, accept only the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, as authoritative, and insist that Mount Gerizim, in the heart of the West Bank, rather than the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, is the proper center of worship.

Although they get along well enough today, in ancient times, such enmity existed between Jews and Samaritans that Samaritans would often refuse hospitality to Jews, especially Jews traveling to and from Jerusalem, so the rejection of Jesus's messengers that St. Luke describes would have been predictable. For their part, Jews traveling between Jerusalem and points north would typically take the much longer route around Samaria, so they would have a place to lay their head along the way.

So when Jesus decides to take the shorter route through Samaria to get to Jerusalem, his choice indicates a sense of urgency, and suggests that danger and sacrifice are likely to lie ahead. Those would be fair expectations, but they seem not to be shared by James and John, who sound like they didn't get the memo, by which I mean Jesus's preaching about bearing suffering and refusing to retaliate. Apparently they expected the Samaritans to make an exception for Jesus and his followers. Perhaps they thought others would perceive Jesus and his movement as special without being instructed, even though they obviously didn't understand his movement themselves.

In fairness, though, even after the Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, lots of people connected to the Jesus Movement didn't understand it very well. Apparently, some insisted that those events hadn't changed anything, and that one still had to be Jewish to follow Jesus, while others believed those events had made it acceptable for anyone to do anything, despite Jesus's specific teachings on right and wrong. I'm glad I

don't have St. Paul's job, and can merely admire his pastoral response to what must have been an extreme situation.

Paul knew he didn't have the authority to make religious law, or any other kind of law, and had been consistent in his insistence that gentiles who became Christians didn't have to follow Jewish law. But he also made clear what should have been obvious: if everyone did whatever they wanted, there wouldn't be a Christian community or movement. And faithfulness to Christ is more important than indulging our own desires. So in today's passage from Galatians, Paul isn't so much writing law as sharing essential wisdom that will enable the community to govern itself.

All Christians should consider how we govern ourselves as an inherently diverse community, one that will never be of one mind on many important questions. We should expect neither strict uniformity nor chaos, and indeed, we should expect that our unity is based on God's love, not human authority, persuasion, or consensus. But enjoying the grace God lovingly intends for us requires us to put God first, ahead of society, country, and our own wills.

Jesus pointed this out to would-be followers as he began his journey. As an act of love, he manages their expectations, giving them a truly free and fair choice. Following him may mean giving up material comforts, as well as the social comfort of fitting in. Following Jesus may mean violating social and familial obligations. But it's important to remember too that following Jesus means something different now than it did then. During Jesus's public ministry, some were called to literally follow him, but today, we are only able to follow Jesus in a metaphorical sense. And even in his public ministry, Jesus would sometimes order people to stay put and proclaim the power and love of God in their own villages, as we saw last week in the story of the Gerasene demoniac.

We tend to expect that our relationship with God will change our lives so completely that they will be unrecognizable, except when we expect that our relationship with God won't change our lives, or anything else, at all. While I believe that a call to apostolic faith is inherent to the life of a mature Christian, in the sense of faith that leads us to lead others to a relationship with Christ and his church, calls to be a literal apostle, like a bishop or a missionary, are uncommon.

The Psalmist understands that God's full delight "is upon the godly that are in the land, upon those who are noble among the people." It is only "those who run after other gods" who "shall have their troubles multiplied." So while some of us are called to uproot ourselves, most of us are called to bloom where we're planted.

The key, as always, is to listen to what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, and then to carry out that call, rather than to tell God what we're going to do, or to be. The purpose of our freedom is not self-indulgence, but the freedom to live according to the individual purposes God reveals to us when we are truly open to God's influence. Holy wisdom includes understanding that living according to God's will for us leads to better

outcomes than acting on every impulse we have. The Psalmist also points out that God gives counsel to the faithful, and when we live according to God's counsel, we are blessed with joy, hope, and peace.

That is what we reasonably may expect from a life lived in relationship with God and other Christians; no more, no less. We should expect great things from God, not from the world. Sometimes great challenges, but always great blessings. And we should be open always to the possibility that God might accomplish great things through, and in, us. For these reasons among many others, may we always give God our trust, praise, and glory.