

August 1, 2021
Lectionary 18, Year B
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:24-35 (John 6:15)
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Expectations

When I was in high school, I was on my school's swim team. At the beginning of my senior season, our coach, had us write our goals for the season on post-it notes and put them up on a bulletin board in the pool area so that we could remember our goals and celebrate them if and when we met our personal goals for the season. I really enjoyed being on the swim team. I must have enjoyed it, to go to practices for at least two hours a day six days a week, from the end of August through the middle of November for four years.

But much as I enjoyed swimming, I have to say, I wasn't that good at it. I was never my team's, my school's star swimmer. I swam freestyle, the crawl. But I never became a swimmer who brought home the big points for my team.

My favorite event was the 500, 20 laps of the pool. My next best event was the 200, 8 laps. In either of those I was usually good for a third or maybe a second place, depending on the speed of the competition. Once we got into the more sprinting distances, usually, the best I could hope for was a third or a fourth place.

It's funny, that of all of things from high school that I've forgotten, one thing that I do remember is those goals that I put up on the board for my swimming season in my senior year. My goals were, to place first in an individual race, to break thirty seconds in a 50 free, and to break seven minutes in a 500.

These were not lofty goals for someone who had been swimming competitively for three years and many on my team achieved them for themselves every meet, but for me, meeting those goals would be a satisfying completion to my high school swimming career.

Are any of you watching the Olympics this year? I am and I've been enjoying the them more than I expected I would, especially the swimming as might be imagined.

While I was never a particularly fast swimmer, still, I can imagine what it takes to swim the way the Olympic swimmers do. I can appreciate what they are doing and watching them awakens some kind of long dormant muscle memory for me.

I have found myself cheering them on from my living room, even though I know that the race was swum in real time before I was even out of bed and on the other side of the world.

What I can't imagine is the pressure that they're under, the weight of other people's expectations, of what they will achieve. And that's just swimming.

One of the reasons that I like watching the swimming competition in the Olympics so much is that I'm reasonably sure that no one will die or get horribly injured during those races. I'm pretty sure that none of those swimmers are going to drown. The worst thing that could happen is that they might have a disappointing finish in one of their races, that a medal favorite might get upset by some new swimming superstar.

Other sports, though, I watch with sweaty palms as the athletes fly through the air and literally put their lives at risk essentially for our entertainment.

There have been a lot of opinions flying about American gymnast Simone Biles sitting out this year's Olympics after the huge expectations going into these Olympics that, as the GOAT, arguably the greatest gymnast of all time, she was going to be a huge medal winner for the United States, expected to win gold in almost any event that she entered.

Plenty of people have celebrated and affirmed her decision to prioritize her physical safety and her mental well-being over people's expectations once it became clear to her that she was not in the right head space to compete safely in events that carry with them the real risk of death or life altering injury if even small mistakes are made.

On the other hand, plenty of people have shared their opinion that they consider her decision to sit out to be a huge disappointment and failure. Those people feel that she let her team down.

Others feel that she did the best thing that she could have done for her team, stepping aside for athletes who were in a better space mentally to compete, when it became clear to her that she would have been putting, not only her own physical and mental well-being at risk but also her team's scores at risk if she had continued.

Added to what has to be a very difficult situation to a world class competitor, added to her own personal disappointment that she's missing out on something that she has spent years working toward, has been the scorn and contempt of people who could never do what she does, but who think that they have the right to heap insults on her because they are missing a show that they were looking forward to, because they are missing the borrowed glory of the Olympic medals that she might have earned through her own hard work.

Last week, during our gospel reading, we heard the story of Jesus' feeding the 5000 with five loaves and two fish and we heard the story of Jesus walking on the water, two stories that made it clear that Jesus was an Olympic caliber miracle worker.

And of course, that was what he would have needed to be in a world dominated by the mythology of the Olympic gods, Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Hades, Athena, just to name a few, who were known in the Roman pantheon, as Jupiter, Neptune, Venus, Minerva, and others.

The Jewish people would have been familiar with the exploits of the gods of the peoples around them and certainly, they would have been familiar with their own stories of the miracles of their God.

Manna from heaven, water from the rock, the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, the ten plagues on the enslaving Egyptians, stories about healings and miraculous battles. Jesus' miracle working could have been perceived as a welcome sign

that their God was working for them again, and was at least as powerful as the pantheon of gods worshiped by the people around them.

Last week, we heard about how Jesus reacted to the fervor that the multiplication of the loaves and fish brought about in the people who had eaten their fill of the miraculous food.

Last week's reading told us that this was their reaction, "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'" (John 6:14).

They knew that they were in the presence of greatness, in the presence of the power of God. But they wanted to control, to contain, to manage their own. They wanted to make Jesus their own, to harness his miraculous power for themselves, for their own benefit, for their own well-being, for their own relief. They wanted to bend him to their will.

I didn't talk about it in last week's sermon but this was the sentence in last week's reading that formed the bridge between the miracle of the loaves and fishes and the miracle of Jesus walking on the water: "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (John 6: 15)

Jesus was an Olympic caliber miracle worker, but when it became clear that, because of his miracles, and only because of his miracles, the people were going to try to elevate him as an earthly king, Jesus fled from the people. Because their agenda was not his agenda.

But the people searched for him, and finally followed him all the way across the sea of Galilee, to Capernaum where they found Jesus. But when they found him, Jesus questioned the nature of their passion and desire for his presence. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26).

Jesus was an Olympic caliber miracle worker, but that wasn't the point of his presence among the people. The miracles were not intended to solve all their earthly problems, to straighten out their lives, to make things easier for them.

The miracles were intended to help them to turn to God, to help them live for God in faith, not to make them control God for proof.

Jesus clearly thinks that the people who had received their dinner from his hand, had followed him, across the sea, not for his words, not for his teaching, not for his presence, but for their breakfast.

So, he began a discussion with the people that is our gospel reading for today and will be for the next three weeks. In it he tried to get the people to understand the true meaning of his presence with them, even as he resisted the pressure that they were putting on him to be what they wanted to be, to give them what they wanted rather than what he wanted to give them.

They wanted miracles.

What he had to give them was his presence and glimpses of the reign of God, which he was inviting them live into, to embody in the world.

Instead of promising them more miracles, more loaves, more fish, Jesus offered them himself, telling them that he was the true sign, the true food that endures for eternal life, the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Of course, the people listening thought that they had finally gotten Jesus to the place where they wanted him to be, finally talking about bread again, finally ready to give them what they wanted, another meal to satisfy their earthly hunger, their earthly desires, that would fill their bodies. So, they said, "Sir, give us this bread always" (John 6:34).

But again, Jesus disappointed their expectations, because his response to this request, was not to start passing out bread. It was to say these words, "I am the bread of

life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

They wanted miracles, but Jesus gave them more. Jesus gave them himself. A word, a promise, a presence, that would be with them always, that would feed them always, not with physical bread, but with hope, with communion, not just for life, but for eternal life.

I’m not sure if anyone other than my coach ever looked at the goals that I put up on the bulletin board at my high school’s pool at the beginning of my senior season.

I didn’t have a lot of pressure on me in my swimming career. I knew that when I swam, my parents, my grandparents, my sister, my friends would be in the stands, cheering me on to my second or third, or fourth, or sometimes worse than that finish.

I didn’t have the burden of other people’s expectations that I would achieve greatness. Just that I would be there, doing my best, swimming the workouts in practice, filling a lane in meets, picking up what points I could for my team.

At the end of my senior season of high school, I had met all three of my swimming goals. I got first once in the 500 during my senior season and I beat my best times in the 50 and 500 free, dropping seconds to get myself where I wanted to be, a 29 second 50 and a 6 minute 59 second 500.

I was never going to the Olympics and I only swam one season in college, but the whole experience made me stronger, happier, healthier during my high school years. In some ways, being average was a great gift. Because I was not born to swimming greatness, I was given the freedom to set my own expectations for myself, my own goals, and no one questioned what I wanted for myself, no one said I couldn’t do it, but also no one said that I should want more, that I was capable of more, that I should push myself beyond what I wanted for myself. There was no pressure.

That freedom is not a freedom that is afforded to our Olympic athletes, who sacrifice so much of themselves, their time, their energy, their bodies, their freedom, time with their families, to reach the pinnacles of accomplishments in their sports.

For many of them, the thing that they might have first found joy and freedom in, swimming the fastest, running the fastest, jumping the highest, flying the highest, doing the most difficult tricks, might, at some point in their careers, become a burden, as their freedom and their joy is entangled and at times strangled by the weight, the burden, the pressure of other people's expectations of them, of what they could or should accomplish.

For Jesus, the Olympic caliber miracle worker, people's expectations of him, while they did not stifle his words or his power, did cause a rift between him and the people. They wanted from him what it was not his mission, not his goal to bring them. He became a disappointment to them, because they could not see, could not embrace, could not learn to desire what he offered.

We're going to be in this story for the next three weeks, but I'm going to tell you what happens toward the end of it anyway. Spoilers!

At the beginning of the story, Jesus ran away from the crowd, because he knew that what they wanted from him, to make him king, was not what he wanted for himself.

At the end of the story, many of those who had followed him, many of those who the text calls Jesus' disciples turned away from him and stopped following him.

They stopped following because they realized that they didn't want what he was offering. They wanted miracles and bread and a life focused on this world. And that wasn't what Jesus had come to give. Jesus didn't come into the world to perform tricks for us. Jesus didn't come into the world to make the lifestyles we currently have easier for us.

Jesus didn't come into the world to entertain us. Jesus came to transform us, to be God with us, to realign our goals and expectations, so that what we want is God's

presence, so that what we want is what God wants to give us; so that what we want is a world shaped after God's own heart.

This whole story, John chapter 6, could be considered to be a story about expectations. The people wanted Jesus to meet their expectations and when he didn't, they turned away from him. They rejected him, rejected his message, rejected his presence, and rejected the life he had to offer.

In some ways this story is a tragedy. But in other ways it is a cautionary tale and an invitation to celebrate what Jesus does gives us, when we come into his presence, when we worship, when we receive the Holy Spirit, when we eat the bread that he does give us, the bread of his presence. For Jesus has not left us alone to become new people, to be transformed.

Jesus is with us to shape us, to renew us, to reform our desires, to love us into new life in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.