

Disappointments ~ October 26, 2008

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46; Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17

A man named Henry S. Haskins, wrote in “Meditations in Wall Street,” “Disappointments should be cremated, not embalmed.” I do not know when he wrote those words, but I do know they can certainly speak to those working on the floor of Wall Street and those of us who have entrusted money into their hands. What has been more disappointing lately than what has happened to our economy? Not only disappointing, but scary in many instances.

Whenever we encounter disappointments, we can either choose to cremate them and blow away the ashes and let them go, or, we can choose to embalm them so that they are preserved forever in our memories. If we decide to embalm them we can always go back over what has happened and stir up unhappy memories that make us even unhappier. If we do this, we can become crippled and fearful of life. It is best that we let our disappointments go, having learned a lesson or two from them.

One of the lessons we might learn is that we should not have impossibly high expectations of life or of others. We might learn to understand people have flaws that we cannot or will not see, and that, from time to time, they will fail us as we will fail them.

Fritz Perls, an early developer of Gestalt Therapy, wrote something about having expectations of others, which says:

*I do my thing
and you do your thing.
I am not in this world
to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world
to live up to mine.*

*You are you and I am I.
And if by chance
we find each other, it's beautiful,
If not, it can't be helped.*

These few lines tell us about human relationships. Often there is disappointment when, instead of taking the time and effort to discover the beauty of one another, we pass like ships in the night.

Another lesson we might learn is that the lives we expected to have just will not be, and we will have to adapt and adjust to what is. A child does not take the direction in life or in marriage that we had hoped; someone we have loved is gone; a new venture just doesn't work out; our plans take a detour as the Dow Jones rises and falls. Our dreams of the future are lost, sometimes through our own actions or the actions of others. Disappointment follows.

Poor Moses, after leading the nation Israel for forty years through the wilderness, discovered that he was not going to enter the Promised Land, that place of “milk and honey.” He was allowed to catch a glimpse of the land that would become the home of his people, but he would never set foot there or dwell there. There might have been a bit of disappointment that crossed Moses' mind at that moment. Our story does not tell us what his feelings were. It simply tells us that this obedient, if sometimes resistant, servant of God, died in Moab and was buried there. Joshua picked up the reins and took the people forward to all they had been promised.

Those early trailblazers who carried the gospel around the Mediterranean and planted the seeds of the early churches, often were disappointed by the reception they received and, yet, they journeyed on, knowing how important it was that their message should survive.

We need to understand that Paul was only in Thessalonica for about three weeks. During that brief time, the Jews responsible for upholding the old laws, rioted and charged the missionaries of Christ with “acting against the laws of the emperor.” So Paul moved on to a neighboring town, Beroea. The same thing happened there. To be safe, Paul left for Athens. The disappointment he must have faced when he encountered such rejection and violence might have been enough to cause a lesser person to give up his or her mission. But he did not, for he considered the “good news” Jesus had brought, and that he had interpreted, to be a precious cargo that he needed to carry everywhere.

Because of the lack of freedom of religion in so many towns, the Christians often chose to meet underground. That is why the letters we find in the New Testament were all written, to strengthen and encourage the people who believed in the new way of Jesus. Life was not easy for them. People feared them and the strength of the person they followed. So they were threatened and beaten and crucified for their faith.

Those early followers expected far better, and often saw their expectations demolished. They can serve as an example to us. We are never to let go of what it is that matters the most in life in spite of all the trials that may come our way.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees must have walked away from Jesus feeling deep disappointment. They had hoped to trap and embarrass him with their questions. But, he always managed to turn another question back on them that they could not answer and they ended up looking the fools. Our reading for this morning tells us that after this encounter with Jesus they decided to stop asking any more questions. He had answered well the query about the most important commandments, distilling all the 600 plus laws they followed down to just two. They were “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Following this he had asked a question they could not think fast enough to answer. They were beaten at their own game. When people are shown up in this way, they retreat and wait for another day to launch new attacks. The keepers of the Hebrew faith withdrew and bided their time.

So, what of our disappointment? It good for us, or bad for us? Of course, this goes back to the opening of this sermon. It depends on how we choose to see disappointment and use it. Elizabeth Tabor wrote, “Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal; it strengthens, tempers, intensifies but never destroys it.”

Moses saw much disappointment in his effort to set his people free. With each set back he became stronger and more determined, with God’s help, to continue on his journey. Paul, shipwrecked, jailed and assaulted for his faith rose up with renewed strength after each encounter with life that did not go the way he had hoped. Often we need to do what those who have come before us did, we need to back up, reflect, open new doors and try once again strengthened by all we have learned from the lessons life and disappointment deal us. As long as we breathe and choose to move forward in life, there is another opportunity to discover all we are made of by a God who loves and cherishes us.

-- Amen