

**Great Expectations (Who, Me?)**  
**Sermon by Fred Joblin, June 15, 2008**  
**St. Paul's United Church, Orillia**

Matthew 9: 35–10:8, 9-20

I remember studying Charles' Dickens' book, *Great Expectations*, when I was in Grade 12. I don't recall having any great expectations for myself at that time in my life—plenty of fantasies perhaps—but no real sense of who I was, or what inner goals I might have, let alone any sense of where the Spirit might be leading me—so I identified with the main character Pip, who had no great expectations for himself, and no great expectations from anyone else, other than to become a blacksmith like his uncle who was helping to raise him.

It wasn't that I didn't show promise in some ways; I was editor of the school yearbook that year, helped start a school spirit club, made humorous school announcements, and even ran for school president. Inside myself, where it mattered, however, I felt inadequate and lacked self-confidence.

This lack of self-confidence went back to earlier times. I certainly did not appear to be a child of great expectations up to grade 6; quite the opposite! My report cards, a few of which I have here, give some hints about these expectations.

Grade 3. October: "Freddie did not complete his Arithmetic examination. He is really very good in this subject, but of course could not receive marks for work not done. His Literature paper was without rhyme or reason and he was unable to explain his very foolish answers. Freddie needs to do a lot of settling down. His written work is very untidy and he seems to have poor work habits." Ouch!

Things improved a bit over the year, and in June, my report said: "Promoted to Grade 4. Freddie made 62% on his final examinations, and so will probably do better work in Grade 4 next year. Good luck Freddie!" I was never sure what the tone of that last comment implied. Was it "Good luck, Freddie," as with hopeful and encouraging expectation, or was there a sarcastic undertone, as in, "Good *luck*, Freddie!"

We moved from London to Ottawa in October of my Grade 4 year, and I apparently had difficulty settling down. The first comments of note came in December: "Although Freddie is still having difficulty settling down, I feel that he has made progress. He is inclined to be rather erratic, working at things he likes and adopting a careless attitude towards things in which he is not interested." And then that classic line of great expectation followed: "I feel that as he grows in maturity he will become an excellent student."

In February, however, the comment was: "You only work at the subjects you like, Freddie. I know you can do better. Your report could have been all 1's and 2's [i.e., A's and B's]"

And in June: In spite of some marks going down, Freddie, you can be an excellent pupil. Keep up the good work in Grade 5." Hmm, my marks went down, and the comment was to keep up the good work. That bit of encouragement always struck me as odd.

In Grade 5, I decided I was grown up enough to be called Fred. An outward sign of an inner lack of reality! And, I had my first crush—on my teacher Miss McCreary. The October comment said:

“Fred is doing excellent work.” A crush only goes so far toward motivation, however, and December’s comment was: “Fred is still doing very good work, but he isn’t working as hard as he was.” And the slipping continued. In February, it was: “Fred is doing good work but is inclined to be rather talkative.” June’s non-committal comment was a rather curt: “Fred should do well in grade 6.” So much for marrying Miss McCreary.

I recall the long walk home carrying those report cards. I knew my parents would be disappointed and their expectations for me not kept. I know my teachers were trying to be helpful and encouraging, and my parents were never overly critical, but I remember ending up feeling that I’d let everybody down and wondering what was wrong with me.

I wonder how I would have felt and responded if I had heard the words then: “Fred, you are special. You have unique gifts. Wonderful things are in store for you. You’ll have an amazing life and do great things. Listen to your deeper voice within that knows life is good and you are blessed and a blessing to others!” No report card, and no adults, ever said those things.

Now there *were* signs of promise nonetheless. I won the school public speaking contest in grade 7. My gym teacher in Grades 7 and 8 helped me become a successful, competitive gymnast. I did a math project in grade 11 that was published in a university magazine.

The great irony for me, and for many people I’ve talked to over the years, is that outer appearances and successes can be deceiving and don’t always match what’s happening inside. Even the people we think of as great often have inner insecurities and fears that hold them back from being all that they truly could be. I’ve heard that the deepest fear of corporate executives is that they will be “found out”; in other words, people will learn of their inner feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Even someone as wonderful as Mother Teresa apparently had deep-seated issues of inner insecurity.

So I can easily imagine the surprise and perhaps disbelief of the disciples when Jesus sent them out to do exactly the kind of teaching and healing work that he was doing. “Who, me?” they must have wondered.

“Who, me?” might also be our initial response when asked to do something huge. It’s like the bewildered feeling of the student who was asked by the teacher to name two pronouns. “Who, me?” he asked. And the teacher said, “Correct! Very good!”

Listen to another version of what Jesus said to his followers, as if he were speaking to us as well:

*My friends, there are so very many people needing healing and needing to hear the good news about God’s love. I can only do so much by myself. Following me doesn’t just mean coming along for the ride. It means doing what I am doing. There is so much work to be done, and now it’s time for you to do your part! God’s spirit is in you, just as it is in me. You can trust that. You now have the power to heal and to teach and to share the good news. Do all this for the love of God, just as I have done.*

Or in simpler language:

*Teach the people. Share the news.  
Show the new life they can choose.  
Heal the sick. Calm their fears.  
Give them hope. Soothe their tears.  
You've got everything it takes  
to do this work, for goodness' sake.*

The imagery of the harvest adds urgency to Jesus sending the disciples out, as all other tasks must be set aside when the crop is ready. Also, in the New Testament, “harvest” serves as a symbol of God’s coming reign, so Jesus is declaring the urgency in the disciples’ task, as so many are in need of liberation, justice, wholeness, and restored relationship with God.

It’s also important to note that Matthew’s account names twelve disciples as apostles—symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel in Hebrew history. “Apostle” is from a Greek word that means “those who are sent.” The names listed do not imply that there were only these disciples. Other people followed and served Jesus, including Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna, Bartimaeus, Nicodemus, and many more. So many more than just the 12 were likely sent out.

I wonder what then happened—how the apostles did and how they felt and responded once they were on their own. Did they live up to the expectations Jesus set before them? Did they offer the kind of hospitality he described, of welcoming everyone, especially those who were lost or rejected, into God’s family? Did they have the power of the spirit to heal? Were they accepting of the hospitality offered—or not offered? Did they handle rejection graciously? Did they view rejection or attacks as positive opportunities to speak up anyway? Did they have the courage and trust needed to fulfill such great expectations?

The thing is, acting with such courage and trust can be difficult if we have small expectations of ourselves or if others have small expectations of us. As the saying goes, “Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed.” So if we are to have great expectations—if we are to live up to the great expectations God has of us—we need to let go of any insecurity, any lack of confidence, any worries as to the consequences of our actions, any fear that says we’re not good enough or capable enough or brave enough.

My favourite part of the story is Jesus telling the apostles not to worry about what to say, that the Spirit will be with them in the moment to guide what they say. That’s a hard one for those of us who like to be prepared, or to rehearse in our minds what we plan to say, or to work up the courage to do something brave, or to think we need certain credentials or status before speaking up. Jesus is saying to forget all this! Just do it! Trust that the spirit will guide you. If we make a mistake, we can fess up and try again. Every day is a new opportunity to bring love to someone. Each moment is an opportunity to choose to give a helping hand, to call or visit someone, to hold someone in our prayers, to offer a heartfelt welcome, to give more than is “reasonable,” to be open to change in our lives.

I’ve just finished reading a very inspiring book that Frances Flemming recommended, called *Three Cups of Tea*. I’ll refer to it next week again on First Nations Sunday. The book tells the story of Greg Mortenson, who had been a mountain climber and who, at the point his life changed, had been unsuccessful at climbing K2, the second highest mountain in the world. He was rescued and taken

to a remote village in Pakistan where his heart went out to the children there, who had no school yet showed a passionate desire to learn. Mortenson promised them a school.

Several chapters in the book describe the determined effort he made to fulfill that promise, which he did, despite setbacks, frustrations, and huge logistical challenges. He became the one Westerner who was trusted by the Muslim population of Pakistan and later, Afghanistan, in the midst of local wars, 9/11, and the war in Iraq. His vision was to promote peace and change the world, not through bombs, but through schools, and especially by providing an education for girls. This great expectation of one school ended up becoming his life work, with the establishment of the Central Asia Institute. Since then 64 schools have been built, with more than 25 000 students enrolled. He has become the beloved and respected father-figure for thousands and thousands of people.

This is the kind of father energy that Jesus showed and that he encourages in all of us, especially us men as we embrace his way of being fathers and grandfathers, or father figures if we don't have children of our own. Our strength comes from the Spirit to speak out for justice, to use the power of love in nurturing and guiding others, to live out of higher expectations to create a sustainable planet, and to make sure all are clothed and healthily fed and housed.

Hillcrest Lodge, just opened up to its first residents, is another example of a great expectation becoming reality despite innumerable obstacles. Everyone involved is to be commended for helping make Hillcrest happen, although what's clear is how much more is needed to provide adequate and affordable housing in this and in other communities around the world.

Big ideas usually start out small, with no conception of what it will really take to accomplish the goal or where it will lead. Greg Mortenson had no idea where that promise to build one school would take him. He was actually a very unlikely candidate to succeed, and this is something to remember, for the unlikeliest of people are often the ones to do amazing things. Jesus himself was unlikely, coming from a poor, humble background—a carpenter's kid. His followers were a rag-tag group of people with no great expectations; in fact, Jesus spent a lot of time having to respond to their quarrels and inability to understand what he was about. They were hardly ones suited to true greatness!

People who become great have to start somewhere, usually from humble beginnings or without obvious promise to begin with. Pip, in the novel *Great Expectations*, had minimal expectations even after an anonymous benefactor improved his station in life, before he came to feel love rather than shame for his benefactor, who turned out to be an escaped convict. Gandhi was a small-time lawyer before becoming a leader of peaceful revolution in India. Einstein was a clerk in a patent office before coming up with his Theory of Relativity. Eighty-year-old Maya Angelou, whom Kathie and I had the privilege of hearing speak on Friday evening, was totally mute for several years before becoming a modern renaissance woman of great talent and achievement and a strong voice for justice.

Each one of us, no matter how it may look at the moment, has unlimited potential for the kind of greatness exemplified in the life of Jesus. All we need is a willingness to listen for what God is asking us to do, and a passion to follow through with courage and trust.

Such stories I find encouraging, and they remind me of a time in my life when expectations were at their lowest. I was 20, in second year university, when I was sent to southern Saskatchewan as a complete greenhorn on my first mission field as a student minister. Preparing sermons was tortuous, mainly because I had no inner passion for what to say. I avoided rather than embraced visiting people, since I was shy and unused to deeper levels of conversation. My asthma got so bad from the stress, as well as the grain dust, that I spent three days in hospital. The only funeral I was asked to do was in the neighbouring rural charge, and when I arrived, my stomach was in such anxious pain, I spent the afternoon in someone's bed while a former minister of the area took the service at the last minute. And after one worship service—where everyone sat at the back, mind you—an elderly man asked me if they gave speech lessons back in theology training. When I answered, “I think so,” his comment was, “Good, ‘cause you need ‘em!” I was hardly a minister of great expectations!

Fortunately, and thankfully, my dad came out to visit for a week and led one Sunday worship service. At least they got one good sermon that summer! I feel eternally grateful for this fatherly support. I honour and celebrate this fathering gift and all the gifts I have received from other father figures who have guided and encouraged me along the way to raise my self-expectations, to ask what God's expectations for me might be, and to commit to the path to which that leads.

May we all gain a deeper awareness of the greatness we are called to, of the high expectations God has for us to live meaningful lives that make a difference and that help bring healing and peace to others and our planet.

By the power of the Spirit, may we raise the expectations we have of ourselves and others, that together we may live with the same passion and power of love that Jesus did, and with which he entrusts us. Who, me? Yes, me. And you, and you, and you! May it be so. Amen.