

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Scripture: Luke 12:48

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required;
And from the one to whom much has been entrusted,
even more will be demanded.”

At age seventeen, I had five great passions. Four of them included: tinkering with the big blue 1955 Buick that I'd bought for three-hundred-and-fifty dollars; fishing for bass on our small and weedy lake; writing for my high school newspaper; and trying to get a member of our high school's cheerleading squad named Heidi to go on a date with me. I quickly discovered that I was mildly competent at the first three and wildly clumsy at the last, as is demonstrated by the fact that in my early efforts to woo Heidi I pointed out that she had the same name as our dog.

My fifth great passion—which I believe to be common among teenagers—was sleeping in late on Saturday morning. At this I excelled—I might even have been a prodigy of sorts. Left to my own devices, I would have blinked myself awake at around 1:00 in the afternoon, poking around in the refrigerator for breakfast just as my parents were finishing lunch.

Alas, as things turned out I had precious few opportunities to exercise my special genius for slumber. My first-generation German-American father, the very embodiment of the storied Protestant work ethic of which sociologist Max Weber

wrote, had other plans for me. God made Sunday for rest—but Saturday for labor—and my weekends always began with a long list of chores.

Docks had to go in. Docks had to come out. The anchor on the raft needed re-setting. The pump needed priming. We had a shed to build. We had brush to clear. The grill wanted cleaning. The garage wanted sweeping.

“Somebody” needed to fix the fence. “Somebody” needed to haul two-hundred pounds of salt to the water softener. “Somebody” had to go to the nearest gas station—a forty-five minute round trip—to get fuel for the boat. I feel for those people whose fathers viewed them as nobody—but, at the time, I found being “somebody” no great honor.

Cutting the lawn undoubtedly qualified as the worst chore. To save money, my father had cagily invested in a used Sears lawnmower that might have once belonged to Julius Caesar. It started reliably, somewhere between the two-hundredth and three-hundredth pull.

Our lawn, which sat just a foot or two above lake level, routinely had snakes in it. And not just a few. Garters, racers, black water, Eastern hognose snakes—if it slithered its way around Michigan, we got them. So, while I mowed, I had to maintain a vigilant serpent patrol—because if I ran over one, I knew “somebody” would have to clean that mess up.

As a result, I developed a little ritual. If I saw a snake, I'd stop cutting, walk around the mower, grab it behind the head, and throw it over the fence into the neighbor's yard. Sometimes, later in the day, I'd see our neighbor's son mowing their yard and tossing the snakes back.

I carried all of these responsibilities heavily. My father expected so much of me. Why wouldn't he just let me sleep? Was that so much to ask?

Responsibilities tend to land in our lives with a thud. Sigmund Freud wrote that most people are frightened of responsibility, and we can understand why. Responsibility sounds hard. It sounds wearisome. And, perhaps most importantly, it sounds like it includes the possibility of failure and embarrassment and shame. Who wants any of that?

We may feel these anxieties amplified when big responsibilities get joined with great expectations. In our good intentions, we sometimes say things like: "I know you can do it!" "I believe in you!" "You've got this!" And, I suppose, these sorts of statements sit much better than something like: "You, my friend, are destined for failure." But I suspect that, at some point in our lives, each of us has felt a little uneasy when someone expressed greater confidence in us than we had in ourselves.

We can imagine, then, how the followers of Jesus might have felt when he said to them the words we read in Luke chapter 12: "From everyone to whom much

has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” That doesn’t sound very comforting, consoling, or carefree. That sounds like whopping big responsibilities and whopping great expectations—coming from no less an authority than the Son of the Living God.

“I expect a lot of you” unsettles us when it comes from a parent or a teacher or a coach. Imagine it coming from the Savior of All Humankind.

What happened, his followers may have wondered, to the Jesus of Matthew chapter 11, who declared: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Now *that* sounds like someone who would let you sleep in!

It turns out, though, that on closer analysis we can reconcile these statements of Jesus—and that doing so conveys an important lesson. To get at this, we will need to look at Jesus’s statement in Luke in its context. As is often the case, context provides our best tool to achieve clarity and our most effective weapon against confusion.

The twelfth chapter of Luke has a distinctive structure. It begins by telling us that a massive crowd—thousands of people—had assembled to hear from Jesus. In the ensuing verses, Jesus then has *two* conversations in this setting—one with the

whole crowd, and another one just with his disciples. Let me repeat that: in Luke chapter 12, Jesus has *two different* conversations with *two different* audiences—sometimes he’s talking to everyone who has gathered, sometimes just to his closest followers.

The chapter moves back and forth between these two dialogues: so verse one says “he began to speak first to his disciples”; but then in verse thirteen someone from the crowd makes a comment and Jesus addresses everyone; verse twenty-two suggests that he then turns his attention back toward his disciples; and so on and so on.

These conversations culminate in verses thirty-five through forty, where Jesus offers up a series of closely-related parables on the theme of readiness. Those who follow Jesus must stand in a constant state of preparedness for his instruction and return—like the servants waiting for the master to return from the wedding banquet, and like the owner of a house watching for the unexpected thief. In the course of delivering these parables, Jesus utters one of my favorite lines in the entirety of the gospels: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” Let me give you that again: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” Or, if you will, watch out for the snakes in your path, and be prepared to toss them out of your way.

By verse forty-one, all of this back-and-forth has left Peter confused. So Peter—who has the endearing quality of pretty much always saying whatever is on

his mind at the moment—asks Jesus a pointed question. “Lord,” he inquires, “are you telling this parable for us or for everyone.” He wants to know: “Are you talking to *them*, or are you talking to *me*?”

As we would expect, and in the best rabbinic tradition, Jesus answers this question with another parable. Now, let me be completely honest: to our twenty-first-century ears, this parable makes for tough sledding. Many parables serve as the centerpieces for lots of sermons; this one, not so much.

In the parable, Jesus contrasts two different slaves. In both cases, the master has given the slave authority over the *other* slaves during his absence. In the first case, the master returns unexpectedly and finds the slave hard at work doing what he was told. Jesus calls this slave “blessed” and says that the master will reward him by putting him in charge of all his possessions.

Things don’t go so well for the second slave. Here, the master returns unexpectedly to find the slave he left in charge beating the other slaves, getting drunk, and otherwise disobeying instructions. Jesus says that the master thrashed this renegade slave “severely” and then—he rather graphically adds—“cut him into pieces.” As easy yokes and light burdens go, this doesn’t sound like one.

But we can’t let the *imagery* of the parable—which, I grant you, may make us squirm—overwhelm the *message* of the parable. Remember: Jesus shares the

parable to answer a specific question. And the specific question is: are you talking to *them*, or are you talking to *me*?

As happens so often in the gospels, Jesus resists the binary choice. In essence, he says: “I am talking to *anyone* who will take up my word and my work and who will tend them in the world. Those who do so will be blessed—they will be given more and more of the care of my kingdom.”

Now, notice that we can easily reconcile this message with the message from chapter 11 of Matthew. We can almost hear Jesus adding: “Oh, and by the way. Those good people who will care for my kingdom? Well, their burden will be light, because the most powerful and loving force in the universe will be laboring beside them. When they need it, I will give them rest. Much will be expected of them. But that’s okay. Because they will never, ever toil alone.”

In my view, our text for this morning has much less to do with responsibility as a *burden* than it does with responsibility as a *blessing*. As psychologist and concentration-camp-survivor Viktor Frankl recognized, responsibility is the blessing that gives our lives *meaning*. In fact, Frankl believed so strongly in the idea that he once said we should complement our Statue of Liberty on the East Coast with a Statue of Responsibility on the West.

It can sensibly be argued that responsibility is the blessing that gives our lives its greatest *potential*—even *heroic potential*. As that great philosopher, Bob Dylan,

once observed: “I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom.” We might say that the heroes of our faith—including the everyday heroes—are those who understand the degree of responsibility that comes with God’s love for us. And they do not just understand it—they delight in it. That responsibility becomes a source of perpetual joy.

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Let me conclude by returning to my own little parable—the one with which I began—if I may. For some reason no doubt associated with the mysteries of adolescence, at age seventeen I had lost much of the sense of blessedness I had known at sixteen. At seventeen, I became somewhat jaundiced.

But, at sixteen, I didn’t mind driving into town for gasoline because I was still intoxicated by the thrill of steering that formidable old Buick around our crazy dirt roads. At sixteen, I didn’t mind loading salt into the softener because I was still impressed that I was strong enough to drape a bag over each shoulder and walk down those rickety basement stairs with them. At sixteen, I didn’t mind fixing the fence or working on the shed because I was still astonished that my father trusted me to swing a hammer and that I knew how to do it.

My father expected a lot of me. That was a great blessing. And, with the passage of time, it has become within my memories a great source of happiness. I

was smarter at sixteen than seventeen—life works that way—and it can take a while to regain the wisdom of the child.

Oh, and there's one other piece to this parable. All those chores I've described? I almost never did any of them alone. My dad usually worked beside me.

He even rode into town for gas. I didn't understand why at the time—I did the driving and the pumping and he barely said a word. But I understand why now. His simple act of being there made my burden easy and my yoke light. To paraphrase Jacob in the Hebrew Bible: "Surely, God was in that place, and I did not even know it."

Sisters and brothers in Christ, everyone in this sanctuary this morning has their challenges, some very serious and daunting. That's true. But it's also true that much has been given to us, and we are extraordinarily blessed. Jesus says: much is expected of us as a result. Importantly: he brings this to us not in the voice of tiresome duty but in the voice of *good news*.

And so:

This morning, and every morning, may your blessings be an occasion for joy and delight.

But may they also be an inspiration to get out and work in God's many fields with God's many hands.

May we, every day, be “dressed for action”—because this tired old world needs our help.

And may we, every day, “keep our lamps lit”—because this dark old world needs all the light we can bring to it.

Or, as my plainspoken father used to put it:

“Time to wake up.

“Let’s get at it.

“We’ve got a lot to do.

“And nobody else is going to do it for us.”

And the people said: Amen.