

Before we read our next scripture from Luke 17, I'd just like to note I feel disappointed this morning, this weekend. I lament Vilmarie couldn't make it here. She traveled with other national Presbyterian Church leaders in the Holy Land, working on ecumenical connections. On Tuesday, she came home with a virus and a persistent fever. Sparing the details, doctors grounded her for three weeks. I expect that's suffering, or at least disappointing, for her as well!

I'm disappointed, because I expected such a good experience for us and others in our presbytery. Being connected with kin in Christ in the wider church. Hearing about people like us in other places—different particulars, yet so similar. Feeling inspired for living faithfully in our way, and simply enjoying Vilmarie who is a lot of fun. I looked forward to it, planned it for months. And my expectations were dashed, disappointed by a short text message, then a longer email.

That's the trouble with expectations. We can't live without them. Expectations give us motivation. They lift our spirits in anticipation. And when our expectations don't meet reality—maybe you've heard this before ... it helps me make sense of life. When expectations don't correlate with experience, the gap between the two is the degree of grief, frustration, maybe anger or fear we might feel. Truth is, of course, we have many disappointments in life. Unmet expectations. Things just don't go as we imagine and plan. So over the weekend I tried to go with the moment and throw

together a few thoughts about what we do with disappointments. How could we deal with them and move on, move into new and good life again?

Far more than accounts of perfection or blissful success, the Bible is full of stories about disappointment, sometimes in the form of chronic suffering, or in extremes of horror and tragedy. Stories about individual hardship, prejudice in culture, injustice in society, horrific effects for whole nations. We'll get to the story in Luke. But first, words of Psalm 42 came to mind as I lived through this moment. As we hear it together, I invite us to remember times of disappointment large or small, when tears have been our food. When our souls are cast down and disquieted. When we've faced potentially deadly wounds and adversaries. Let's pause a moment in silence see what arises in our minds and hearts as we remember other disappointments in life. {silence} Now, remember and hear what the spirit may say.

{read Psalm 42}

Psalm 42 models the importance of acknowledging and naming our disappointments. Each person and situation differ, of course. Sometimes grief and frustration "last but for a night," and in others for a lifetime. In naming what's wrong we take a first step to claiming and living into what's right. On the way of faith, we name our disappointments within a wider frame of God's grace.

Lamenting, even with tears, yet still longing for life in Holy Love, like deer for flowing streams. "Why are you cast down, o my soul?" That familiar refrain—a sincere question—came to mind and heart as I processed Vilmarie's text and as I hold in my remembering heart what you share with me—struggles with illness, with chronic diseases like deadly wounds, with disquiet about work or family relations or events of our world.

Truth is, amid disappointment, we either adjust expectations or the negative emotions consume us, take our life. My soul is cast down, the psalmist says,

therefore I remember you, O God. The depth of your sacred mystery calls to deep places inside me. I remember your steadfast love, like a melody stuck in my head lying awake at night; like a prayer I say throughout the day. Why are you cast down and disquieted, o my soul? Hope in God. Come to praise again our help, and our God. You see, friends, in the end the psalmist makes a turn we all face and can find in faith. From disappointment to hope. Hope. Not blithe “you’ll get over it” advice. Not avoidance, with repressing “just move on” platitudes. Not naïve unrealistic optimism. Real hope that knows the disappointment, the suffering, the loss and still looks to the Holy One among us, nevertheless.

That’s this next story in Luke. Vilmarie planned to read the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story Jesus heals another Samaritan. Hear again what the Spirit may say.

{Read Luke 17:11-19}

I expect the Samaritan knew a lifetime of disappointment. Or at least, as long as he endured leprosy. Suffering in body. And maybe more painfully, shunned in relationship, probably even from those most beloved, ever quarantined from community. Samaritans were close cousins of Jews. Same biblical lineage. So he may well have known Psalm 42. Or at least, his heart knew it in Spirit. Longing for Holy Love streaming through the world, hoping in the One everyone said lived with that very saving presence and power. “Jesus, have mercy ...” That’s the same word at the heart of the Good Samaritan Parable. A good neighbor is one shows mercy. Forgiveness for sin can be a form of mercy. But biblical words rarely get used to express that purpose. Rather, mercy means “steadfast loving-kindness,” ongoing faithful relationship—with God, as the unfailing source of abundant life; with others, especially when life is not so abundant. That’s what Micah envisions as the heart of personal motive and societal norms. And in Paul’s letters, mercy conveys God’s power to reconfigure fullness of life individually and communally.

“Jesus, have mercy.” He turns and sees them. He compassionately, fully comprehends their personal and social reality. And more deeply, he envisions them as God’s beloved even still. “Go show your selves, your true selves to the priests,” he says, to the ones who named what was wrong with you and had power to exclude you. Luke doesn’t graphically detail what happened as they went, like Madame Pomfrey’s magic wand in Harry Potter, or sci-fi movie special effects. I wish we could cure all suffering diseases or other hurts. Though with tears as food, we know it doesn’t happen. And that’s not the promise of this story.

You see, friends, Luke calls us to believe in something deeper, more profound, more powerful than anything that causes small disappointments or takes our very life. Jesus offers us hope in Divine Mercy. Steadfast love moving us to care for a spouse, a parent, a friend with an unstoppable debilitating disease that sure makes life different than we imagined. Steadfast love and passion moving us to believe in our vision for work and keep pursuing it, though particulars may differ from what we planned. Holy Depths of Love calling to depths of our hearts, even after some church experiences have hurt us, repelled us, even amid religious bigotry and violence like more horrific shootings at a mosque, moving us to seek a sanctuary of hope and joyful committed companions for the journey. Practical Empowering Love in people like you and me who long for Micah’s vision of faithfulness to be real for all of us and all the world in the fullness of peace.

Friends, we can move from disappointment to hope, when we trust in God. We trust God does not desire or design our disappointments, hardship, suffering, loss. We trust that God is with us in those experiences. And in Sacred Grace, goodness comes amid the sadness. That’s God’s will! The Holy Way of compassion and service we follow in Jesus leads to true meaningful, abundant life. These things I remember, sings the psalmist, how I went with the whole congregation to worship in God’s

house, with gladness and thanksgiving. One Samaritan turned back, pressed through crowds surrounding Jesus, to fall at his feet and thank him.

Thanksgiving, gratitude. Practicing gratitude adjusts expectations, keeps negative emotion from consuming us. We let go of anger or frustration and heal hurts. As we give thanks, we recognize so many people living as God's beloved. We reframe how we see reality—on social media, in what we read or hear from friends. We envision God's way of life, and nurture trust in God's promises of possibility. Maybe we even find gifts we didn't know we had before. It can be little fleeting things each day we see, we sense, we receive in kindness. It can be moments when the larger scope of life strikes us and our hearts open with awe and wonder and goodness we have known, so far beyond our plans and abilities. Miracles. Yes, friends, in moments of disappointment try to find things to be grateful for—it's one of the best ways I know the Spirit changes frustration to patience, grief to joy, guilt or anger to hope, fear to renewed purpose.

Get up, go on your way, Jesus tells us. Your faith has made you well. Faith that is enduring relationship with God, beyond mere principles or ideology to simply swallow and regurgitate in often sickening consequences. Yes, friends, life often turns out different than we plan or imagine possible—in our best dreams or our worst nightmares. And here's good news. Amid all our disappointments and losses, however little every day and even in the face of the greatest that is death, our gospel promise is that life in God's love goes on. Rises again. Gets revealed in ways unexpected and sometimes even more beautiful, rich, fulfilling than if everything goes according to our perfectly orchestrated plots. In God's mercy, friends, disappointments turn to ... well, resurrection, really. That's the heart of our journey in Lent. Jesus going to cross. Huge disappointment of expectations. Real loss. And that is not the end. There will be an empty tomb. There will be moments when we know the depths of God's love in Jesus Christ come to us and call to us again when

we are confused and afraid like the first women in the garden at dawn. When we are locked in fear like the disciples in the upper room. When we are stumbling on our way with lots of questions and we receive flashes of insight and inspiration.

Another disappointment rose in my memory this weekend. This ticket is for an old green-painted school bus, scheduled to leave at 7:15 am. It would have taken me and my son into the interior of Denali National Park toward the mountain herself. I explored plans and calculated possibilities for months, maximizing this opportunity. When my siblings on a float plane came twenty yards from a grizzly bear on shore, or had black bears cross the road right in front, or saw moose and other majestic wildlife—and I saw none—I always knew Denali was coming! The inside passage of Alaska is beautiful. Still, I knew Denali was coming! So when the train arrived at the park late afternoon, I rushed to get tickets with great expectation.

About 10:00 that night, my son didn't feel well. Sparing sickly detail, I'll just say I stifled a chuckle when hotel staff arrived dressed head to toe in white hazmat gear! I didn't laugh much when I joined him a few hours later! He figures it was food on the train. You see, by the next night, after being quarantined in a private van for the journey to Anchorage, we felt much better. My siblings said they'd heard it was a great day to be on that bus. Lots of wildlife. And the big mountain shrouded in clouds 60-70% of the time was clearly in view that day. Disappointed? Yeah. Sad. Frustrated. Once-in-a-lifetime-expectation dashed.

I held onto this ticket. probably at first as a minimal vestige of goodness I longed for. And a bookmark for whatever I read that day. When I found it in that book a short time later, I still kept it. I hold onto this ticket and remember many disappointments will come in life. I hold onto this ticket and remember I was lucky—grateful for the great privilege really to be anywhere near that mountain, on a trip that was a gift from my parents, with so much other goodness. I hold onto this

ticket as a kind of symbol of longing for such experiences still pulsing in my heart; as a reminder to keep looking for such beautiful vistas and inspiring encounters in life all the time. I hold onto this ticket dreaming I may get back to Denali one day. If I do, I'll show this ticket, tell 'em my story and see if it gets me on that green bus!

Dear friends, relationship with God in Jesus Christ is our ticket for living faith. Yes, I'm disappointed Vilmarie got sick. I pray that like the ten lepers she'll get better. I hope she can come among us some other time. Until then I hold on to my ticket of faith and remember so much goodness in our witness, abundance in our life together, and a lot of fun in all of you! I will keep asking with you, sincerely, why are you cast down, O my soul. And I will keep holding our ticket of faith even as I hold a hand in prayer or maybe share a hug in the Holy Spirit's embrace.

Truth is, I wasn't sure I could find this ticket on such short notice this morning. Trying to remember: what book did I read on that trip? And so there may be times when it seems hard for us to find that ticket of faith. Or maybe we know someone else who's lost that ticket amid all the stuff of life. Keep asking "why are you cast down, o my soul"—a sincere question. And keep hoping in God, crying out: "Jesus, have mercy." Hold onto that ticket, dear friends. Hold onto that ticket like one friend this morning reached into a pocket and pulled out an AA coin—five years! Hold onto your ticket and share it with others disappointed that they've misplaced theirs in the moment ... so we can all get on this big old green-painted school bus together!

Thanks be to God. Amen.