

Great Expectations
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
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Many of you probably don't know who Jack Stimson was; he died in early September. Jack attended Neighborhood Church since before World War II, and became a member shortly after he returned from the war. I didn't know him either, except I was privileged to visit him in the Intensive Cardio Unit at the hospital in Arcadia shortly before he died. He was very uncomfortable, on machines, with tubes in and out of him. I took his hand, and he spoke to me like a man who knew he was speaking some of his last words.

Right away he started talking about politics. There is something he said that I've thought a lot about ever since. He said, "the United States will recover economically. I'm not worried about the economy – we'll always get that back. But the thing that I'm most disturbed about, and could really bring this country down, is this new acceptance of torture in our foreign policy. The economy will come back, but if we don't stop the torture of our foreign prisoners, eventually, we will lose it all. Nothing has done more to destroy our country, to destroy who we are. If we don't fix this, all will be lost."

I was very moved by his words, and knew that he wanted his message to get out. I deliver it to you this morning. No matter who our country elects on Tuesday, the country will take stock of the damage that's been done over these eight long years. There is so much, but if we prioritize, we would find that the degradation of human rights and disregard of habeas corpus are the first things to reverse. It's the tip of the iceberg, but I agree with Jack, that nothing has done more to destroy our country than the shame of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and all the places like it whose names we'll never know.

As soon as the United Nations were ignored in 2003 and we illegally attacked Iraq, the world's opinion of our great country plummeted. Since then, the world's expectations of the United States have gotten lower and lower.

And when we know others' expectations of us are low, that can cause us to have low expectations of ourselves. In fact, it has become the American way to teach low expectations to our children. During the Clinton years, the public funding of education was cut dramatically, and the years that followed reflect this. The message we send to our children when we cut education funding is this: you must lower expectations of yourselves, because you must accept low expectations of your future.

Back when African Americans had some of the first access to quality education, the expectations were very high of those privileged enough to be well-educated. This is well documented in the film *The Great Debaters*, with Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker. It's the true story of Wiley College, the best black college in Texas, and their amazing Debate Team in 1935. They received a very unusual invitation to compete at Harvard, and they won. The film is a remarkable example of the power of expectations. In the setting of an excellent education, the students believed in themselves enough to do extraordinary things.

Another education story that illustrates the power of expectations is of a study that was recently done in a public school setting. There was an experiment. At the beginning of a school year, the best teachers were told they would be teaching the best students for the entire year, and the worst teachers would be teaching the worst students for the year. The experiment was to see what a difference – if any – this would make on the national achievement test scores. How do you think the two classes did? As was expected by both teachers and students, the best students had even better test scores than the year before, and the worst students performed more poorly.

At the end of the year, the teachers were gathered. They were told: actually, we didn't give you the best students or the worst students. Both groups of students were selected at random. The teachers were astonished. But there was more: you're also not the best or the worst teachers, either. The teachers were also selected at random. Expectations are that powerful.

It's true that, for African Americans, the expectations of America have mostly been on the low side. Horrific violence is hardly new to our country. In the Great Debaters film, the question at the Harvard competition was "Is Civil Disobedience a moral tool?"

The closing argument in the film is very powerful. The Harvard students had just received applause for their argument. The debater from Wiley College stands and goes to the microphone. At first he doesn't say anything. And then he says,

"In Texas, they lynch negroes. My teammates and I saw a man strung up by his neck . . . We drove through a lynch mob, pressed our faces against the floorboard. I looked at my teammates, I saw the fear in their eyes, and worse, the shame. What was this negro's crime? That he should be hung in a dark forest filled with fog? Was he a thief, was he a killer, or just a negro? Was he a sharecropper, a preacher, were his children waiting up for him? And who were we to just lie there, and do nothing. No matter what he did, the mob was the criminal. But the law did nothing. Just left us wondering, why? My opponent says, nothing that erodes the rule of law can be moral. But there is no rule of law in the Jim Crow south. Not when negroes are denied housing, turned away from schools, hospitals, and not when we are lynched. St. Augustine said, "An unjust law is no law at all." Which means I have a right, even a duty to resist, with violence, or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter."

It is a very difficult chapter in American history to reconcile, the post-Construction south. And while it may seem like a stretch to compare the violence to free Americans with the torture of foreign enemies in our prisons, the dehumanization is the same. The shame it causes our country is similar. The St. Augustine quotation is eerily applicable to the new civil liberties and homeland securities legislation. "An unjust law is no law at all."

It will be up to the people to declare these laws unjust. Even if Barack Obama is our next president, that is no cure-all. Obama voted for some of that legislation. In fact, we know that the senators – both Republicans and Democrats – cannot be trusted on these matters. Their voting records indicate as much. Thank goodness in this case, the Supreme Court ruled to uphold Habeas Corpus, showing loyalty to the vision of the Founding Fathers.

It's time for all of us to remember what the Founding Fathers said. The courts have been helpful, but in the end, it is the people who must act to re-raise the expectations of the United States. The best hope of raising these expectations in the long run, for the long-term good of both the country and the world, is to go back to the beginning, to restore our national creed.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all [people] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted . . . deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever *any form of government becomes destructive* of these ends, *it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it*, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles..."

Thomas Jefferson, who I know we can denounce for owning slaves, was nevertheless the primary writer of the Declaration of Independence. He described this document as "the genuine effusion of the soul of our country." In his book, *The American Creed*, UU pastor and author Forrest Church says that "Jefferson's words stand as a summation of our highest aspirations as a people." In other words, nothing articulates the great expectations of the United States better. But it is of paramount importance, that these were not only the great expectations of America, but they also *set a standard for the entire world*.

In Church's book there is a single quotation, even before the Table of Contents, that belongs to Abraham Lincoln. After this one, I will cool it with the quotations.

"I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time."

This is why Jack Stimson is so right when he says that if we don't ensure human rights in the practices of our foreign policy, *let alone* the reality of the prison industrial complex of our own people, all may be lost.

The stain of torture on our country over the past five years, is so awful and disturbing, we have had trouble facing it. This is why we don't talk about it and why you don't hear about it. Because of this, the un-confronted shame has resided in the collective subconscious of the country as a whole. I can't help but wonder, if our country has responded and reacted to this deep offense of human and civil rights, by taking a major step forward on another front. I wonder if the progressive changes we see happening now, the California Supreme Court's decision to uphold same-sex marriage in particular, is related to the need to *make up*, to *compensate* for the extreme atrocities we have colluded in abroad. It is only a theory.

But let us enjoy, and not forget what an incredible occasion of surprise that was for us back in May. With a mostly conservative court, it was an act of grace – and a giant step forward in humanity's long walk toward greater equality and justice.

It has allowed us to be where we are now, on the brink of confirming that marriage equality is the wish of the people of California. We are almost there! And God forbid, if this is not the end of our long walk to freedom, we will keep on walking. Remember, an unjust law is no law at all. It would be our right and our duty to protest an unjust law until it is abolished, no matter how long it takes.

Forrest Church also says that "divine authority for human laws is invoked" in our national creed. Indeed, the pursuit of justice and equality is holy work. I want you to know that all of the hard work of the past two months to protect equal marriage rights that *you* have done, *you* the people of Neighborhood Church, has been *holy work*. For our hard work is not only the hope of California, it is the hope of our nation, it is the hope of the world.

Within our national creed we see the blueprint for equal marriage rights, in the free pursuit of happiness, so well described by one of our kids in her letter to the Editor. Kids like Erin Work are the hope of the world, kids who can articulate why equality is such a no-brainer. It is people like Erin Work who are going to re-raise expectations, and it is people like Erin Work for whom raising these expectations is so important.

I predict that when the young people of our country really see what a difficult situation they are inheriting, they will start demanding higher expectations – both of themselves and our country. Some have already started. There is a brand new book by two teenagers, Alex and Brett Harris, called *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*. In their introduction they write, "We believe our generation is ready to rethink what teens are capable of doing and becoming. And we've noticed that once wrong ideas are debunked and cleared away, our generation is quick to choose a better way, even if it's also more difficult."

It gives me hope to see youths, especially the youths of this church, participating in the creation of a better world. Pretty soon this world will belong to them.

And, pretty soon, I might belong to you. In Neighborhood Church, I have found a religious community to serve that believes in itself. You are a high expectations church. In case you haven't noticed, I am a high expectations minister. I expect that you will honor the holy work that you know you are meant to do, however that might make a difference - in your home, in your neighborhood, in our community, in our state, in our world. I have great expectations of how my relationships will deepen with you, knowing that we are each making a deeper commitment to one another.

I have had great expectations for my ministry, since the year 2000, when I entered Starr King School for the Ministry, eight short years ago. In you, I have found a congregation that is able to *receive* high expectations ministry. That is no small thing.

So let us work together in building for tomorrow, for a nobler world than the one we have today. Let us make real the great expectations of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I can't wait!