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Eric Dupee

Luke 2:22-40

“Destined to Disappoint”

In seminary, we were warned that, as pastors, we will not be able please everyone. I heard those words and nodded in agreement, but I didn't really get it. Naturally, you want everyone to like you. When I became a pastor, I operated under the assumption that if someone wasn't pleased, I must've done something wrong.

One of the churches I served had a small, traditional building with a dirt parking lot on the side. Here in Maine, you all know about mud season. You'd park your car and walk through 2 or 3 inches of mud to get to the building. The trustees had to constantly have the carpets professionally cleaned or replaced.

Additionally, you can't park as many cars in a dirt parking lot. There are no lines to keep the cars nice and close. The church was growing. We needed to have as many spaces as possible. The leadership studied the problem, made the decision, and soon we had a fantastic, newly paved, parking lot.

Everything was hunky-dory until Geraldine called the church office. She was not happy. She liked the quaint, country look of the church. She wasn't a regular attendee on Sunday, so the mud wasn't such a problem for her. She said, “Well, if the church has enough money to pave the parking lot it must not need my financial contribution.”

As a new pastor, my first reaction was distress. I kept running it over in my head. “But the church is so much more accessible. We had such a careful decision-making process. It seemed like good stewardship of our resources.” At some point, it suddenly dawned on me. This is what they meant when they said you can't please everyone. It's not about avoiding mistakes. You can do everything right and still not please everyone. It's not about avoiding bad decisions. It's that any decision could lead to someone's displeasure. You can't please everyone.

I think many of us know, deep down, that we can't please everyone, but we still try. We still expect that if we're nice enough and have the best of intentions, everyone should be happy with us.

How many of us have ever felt exhausted trying to satisfy everyone else around us? Have you ever laid awake at night, second guessing yourself, because someone expressed their disappointment in something you did? How many times have you delayed a difficult conversation or put off making a decision, because you feared how someone would react?

It can happen in every aspect of life. If you have kids, you know you can't expect to please everyone in the family all the time. It's true in the church. Pastor Dan can tell you. Actually, Dan is probably the only one who does please everyone. How about town government? How'd you like to try to please everybody in the town of York? Most likely, you won't, no matter what you do.

One thing that's abundantly clear from the Gospels is that even Jesus didn't please everyone. Our reading today is the end of Luke's account of his birth. We just celebrated the touching story of angels, shepherds, and Mary placing her child in a manger.

Following the birth, Mary and Joseph did what Jewish law prescribed. After eight days, it was time for Jesus to be circumcised. After childbirth, a sacrifice was required for the purification of the mother. When they arrived at the Temple, they encountered Simeon and Anna.

Simeon was older and, along with all of Israel, had been waiting his whole life for a Messiah. There were hundreds of years that passed between the close of the Old Testament and the start of the New Testament. Generations came and went. The Hebrew people waited a long time.

Simeon took Jesus in his arms, thanked God for allowing him to see Israel's salvation, and announced that Jesus would be a light to Jews and non-Jews. It was all very glorious. Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about their child. Then, turning to Mary, Simeon said this. He said, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

In other words, the coming of the Messiah also means the coming of conflict. Israel will be divided in its response to Jesus. Some people will be thrilled with him and what he does. Others will despise him. He won't please everyone. In fact, some were so displeased, he eventually got nailed to a cross.

I don't know about you, but that knowledge brings me some level of comfort. I can't please everyone, but Jesus' life is an indication that maybe pleasing everyone was never what God intended. If you make your children go to school, eat their green vegetables, and go to bed on time, they might not like it. But that's your job.

In the workplace, you might have to make a decision your fellow employees don't like. Sometimes what's best for the organization, as a whole, is not well received by some. It happens in church's all the time. Conflict can arise, not necessarily because the church made a bad decision, but because any decision can result in conflict. Those of you who are younger, you might not be able to please your parents with the college you choose, or the spouse you choose, or the direction your life takes.

I think what today's story indicates is that Jesus' life would be guided by something greater than the need to please others. He will go his whole life disappointing people in order to be true to God's call on his life. Those of you obsessed with trying to please everyone (and you know who you are), please hear what I'm about to say. Even the Son of God, himself, couldn't please everyone. In fact, he didn't even try. It was never the goal.

From the time Jesus was a newborn baby, the indication was that he would not please everyone. Jesus would continually disappoint people in order to demonstrate God's liberating love. However, if you flip a page or two in your Bible, you'll find Luke's story of Jesus' baptism. At that point, he was an adult. He was baptized in the Jordan River. After the baptism, a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

God was pleased. The scribes and Pharisees would not be pleased. The demons he cast out would not be pleased. The Roman occupiers, who nailed people to crosses, would not be pleased. But Jesus answered to a higher authority. He had clarity and purpose and the courage to disappoint others in order to live a God-guided and God-directed life.

It was twenty years ago that we decided to pave the church parking lot. I still feel bad when I disappoint people. I still want people to like me, but I have to say it's liberating when you accept the fact that you can't please everyone. In fact, that's probably not what God ever intended for any of us. If you're preoccupied with making everyone happy, you might not be accomplishing the one thing God put you on this earth to do.

What is God's longing for you...not your parent's longing for you, not your friends longing for you, not even your own wishes? What is God's longing for your life? The great

preacher and author of the past, Howard Thurman, is quoted as saying, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Now, I’m not suggesting we all go out and try to disappoint people. This is not a pass to disregard the feelings of others. That fact that someone is upset with you isn’t necessarily a sign you’re on the right track. What I am suggesting is don’t be held captive to the need to please. Be yourself. Speak your truth. Take a stand. Be willing to disappoint someone else in order to true to God’s call on your life. Not only will it feel like a weight has been lifted, God is counting on it.

I’m glad Simeon made clear the Messiah would meet opposition. I’m glad Jesus sent away crowds in order to spend time in conversation with God. I’m glad he put God’s desires before the desires of the religious authorities. I’m glad he didn’t exhaust himself trying to please everyone. I’m glad Jesus did what he did. He couldn’t have been our savior otherwise.

Simeon understood something that takes a lifetime for many of us to understand. You can’t please everyone, but if God is pleased...