

There once was a girl with a curl ... That was the joke my parents shared about me as I was growing up.

I doubt it comes as a shock, but I've not always wanted to be a priest. Growing up, I remember toying with notions of becoming a dental hygienist and a board game consultant. Sometime around third grade, I realized that the manager at McDonald's could go to the Playland any time they wanted! A few years later, I discovered that I was pretty good at math. There was a 4 person math team at each middle school in those days, and I was the only sixth grader in the state to be invited to participate in the state math competition. While I placed only in the top 10 each year of middle school, I never quite managed to make it to Nationals. When people would ask what I wanted to be when I grew up, I enthusiastically answered "a bank teller!"

By the time I got to calculus, my interest in math evaporated. I dutifully worked through each problem and got my homework done correctly and on time, but it wasn't my passion. What did I care about a cylindrical object's surface area to volume ratio? I wasn't exactly planning on designing soup cans for the rest of my life.

Regardless, it became clear that I was to eventually enter the business world. I was really active in a number of extra-curriculars in high school including the drama club, which apparently made my parents nervous. As I was choosing a college, I was told I could attend a Liberal Arts university so long as I didn't dare major in one of the fine arts. I was to 'put those math skills to good use and study something useful.' As I was a very obedient kid and seeing as how a career in stage managing was going to be out of the question, I resolved to be a very useful corporate accountant ~ despite what I saw as the inevitable monotony of sitting behind a desk punching numbers on a calculator. My parents were thrilled – they would brag to their friends about the salary I would one day make.

The summer after my first year in college, having officially declared myself an accounting major, a lady at my church asked what my plans were, and without

a second thought, out popped “urban ministry.” She asked what that was. I, too, was unsure and simply shrugged my shoulders. But there it was – a direction that intrigued me, and a potential occupation that didn’t cause my stomach to churn with anxiety, even if I had no idea what “urban ministry” even meant.

A year later, I came home and announced I was changing my major and had begun the discernment process to become a priest. *It did not go well.*

Because that conversation clearly got off on the wrong foot, I mentioned that I was going to be starting an internship at United Ministries, teaching math to adults. (Talk about putting those math skills to good use, right?) “What do you mean that you will be working for no pay?!?” I thought my dad was going to stroke out right there in the middle of the family room.

I’ve learned that one of the hardest things about life, and a lesson I’ve had to re-visit time and again, is figuring out how to manage the expectations that others impose. I think if I had come home and announced that I was going to be a classical violinist or a trapeze artist I would have been met with the same resistance. The problem, from my parents’ perspective, is that the narrative of my life was as good as written, and I was being contrary and pushing boundaries.

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I’m not sure how long Jesus had been away from Nazareth when we get to this point in his public ministry. Presumably he’s in his late 20s ... he’s spent the last few months (years maybe?) going about Galilee getting his holy on, news of his preaching and miracle-making has spread like wildfire around the region, and his own people don’t accept it. Nope. Not *their* Jesus, a carpenter, the son of Mary and a relation to half the town. His life’s narrative was likewise prematurely written for him, and his family and friends couldn’t allow their perception of him to shift and accommodate the Truth of who he was.

“Prophets are not without honor except in their own hometown,” he says, “and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

I hear a great deal of heartache in his observation. The people who have known him the longest, and presumably the best, have failed to notice or care

what made him tick, what he was passionate about, how he understood himself in the bigger picture. His “tribe” refused to consider if his convictions (what he considered as his life’s purpose) had merit, and thus rejected his personhood as well as his divinity. They might as well have thrown a cloak of invisibility over him. ‘How could he to be a man of spiritual authority?’ they wonder. ‘How could he be the man rumored to have calmed storms and had such insight into the sacred Scriptures?’

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Another of life’s lessons is that it’s not only hard to manage the expectations others have, but it is also very difficult to manage the expectations that we place on ourselves. Looking at Jesus’ situation, it’s hard to know exactly what Jesus knew of himself at this point so early in his ministry – did he understand that he was the Son of God and the chosen Messiah? Or did he understand himself as an itinerant preacher and teacher of Scripture? Either way, Mark indicates that Jesus definitely did understand himself to be at least a prophet – with all the dubious benefits and responsibilities that that entailed.

Mark continues “And yet he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” From where I’m sitting, it seems he was deeply discouraged and his confidence in himself was shot. Jesus being rendered spiritually impotent because of his loved ones’ lack of faith in him is a something of a big deal for him, I would think. And completely understandable.

Thinking of Jesus in all his humanity here has been helpful for me as I’ve sorted out all the expectations I have felt have been imposed on me – not just as a priest, but as a mom, a wife, a daughter, a co-worker and friend. Regardless of the fact that we ought not worry about what others think of us, those perceptions affect us – they affected Jesus and they affect me.

Owning who he was and claiming his own personhood when Jesus’ kinsmen were completely unable to comprehend who he was or why he made the choices he made must have been really hard. And lonely. I get it.

And so I feel a sensitivity to the fact that there are many others who **I’ve** probably pigeonholed and assumed I’ve figured out when really I have no clue who they are, what they value, or what their truth might be.

I think it's human nature to put people in tidy mental boxes: we're lazy by nature, and we don't feel we should have to expend time and energy to truly discover and re-discover others as they change and evolve over time. While most of us recognize that our own process of self-discovery is ever-evolving and dynamic and always changing ... we somehow simply assume that others' character and passions and values are stagnant and unchanging.

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I think one of the biggest problems of our age is that we live out the paradox of deeply wanting to be seen and recognized as we truly are, yet do not make the effort to see and understand others as they truly are: we don't take the time to nurture safe relationships and ask the deeper questions which encourage the transparency, vulnerability and authenticity of ourselves, much less others. As such, we prematurely form static expectations of others that may very well form their invisibility cloak, even as we long to be appreciated in our own fullness. Ironically, the old adage might not be so far off: I would argue that it is important to live a life where you can see and be seen.

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Getting back to the Gospel reading, when we continue on through this passage, we see that Jesus pulls himself together and gets to the place where he does in fact feel secure enough in himself to speak his truth ... The Truth – in love and grace – to all who will listen.

Take notice: he never shuts the door to relationship with those who refuse to listen, but neither does he waste his time spinning his wheels and wallowing in that place of self-doubt and discouragement.

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God sees each one of us as we are and doesn't hold any unrealistic expectations of us. Likewise, we shouldn't hold any unrealistic expectations of ourselves or anyone else.

I still regularly ask myself what I'm going to be when I grow up. I hold no expectation of myself that I'll always be a parish priest. Perhaps I'll one day take the plunge and become that bank teller or McDonald's manager that I once wanted to be. Who knows? Maybe I will be a soup can designer after all!

As long as we're being true to who God made us and where God leads us, all shall be well, despite what anyone else wants of us or expects of us. God's narrative is the narrative that matters; and it is always more complete, more grace-filled, more transformative than any narrative we lazy, simple-minded humans can conjure or impose upon ourselves or on anyone else. And when we get right down to it, God's expectations of us are no different than the ones we should hold for ourselves and everyone else: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. It's that simple.