

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 30th 2018

We are formed by our experiences, which provide a database of sorts that we use in our own personal approach to data analytics. When data patterns are sufficiently familiar, we often don't engage in very deep analysis before reaching a conclusion. Such conclusions are often right and helpful, but sometimes we miss important facts and our judgment is flawed. Some of that is happening in today's readings, which in this sense might be characterized as "tales of the unexpected".

The first reading takes us into the midst of a conflict between David and his disloyal son. Absalom had sowed dissension and eventually fomented a rebellion against his father the king, who fled with the support of his own loyal soldiers. Royal conflicts between father and son are not unknown in history. Most of us can grasp what fuels the conflict based on our own relationships, although those conflicts do not usually reach the state of war!

Whether rooted in rivalry or other wounds from the past, family rifts are troublesome. In royal conflicts such as these, death was the expected outcome for the vanquished. When Absalom seemingly gets his comeuppance -- being trapped by his own hair in the branches of a tree -- one of David's loyal soldiers carries out what he believes would be his king's wishes. (In fact, this is not what David commanded.) David's entire entourage expected a victory celebration, and no one expected a father's love to have such an outsized effect when it came to the fate of a disloyal rebel.

While most of us value loyalty to the king, we can still marvel at the capacity for love and mercy to triumph over retribution for past wrongs. We particularly value being on the receiving end of this kind of generosity. Sometimes, we are the disloyal rebel. David shows the heart of one who values love and mercy, even as he is an imperfect man who stands in need of mercy, too.

The gospel likewise presents some unexpected outcomes. First, Jesus healed the woman who touched his cloak. She is told that her faith has made her well -- but this miracle surely falls into the unexpected category. Even when we ask in faith, we know that we may not receive what we ask. Jesus used that unexpected outcome as a teaching moment.

When Jesus comes to Jairus' daughter, she was already dead. Even if she had been living, I imagine some skepticism from those gathered at the home. After all, healing is a rare outcome, but at least it is not unknown. Raising the dead is another matter! Those present at the scene chose to ridicule Jesus and his assessment of the situation. Understandably so -- there was no entry in their personal database that could have provided another answer. Jesus created a new entry for them through his work of healing. But query: how did they respond after this day passed?

Unexpected works of God in our midst always present the possibility for transforming effects. Those effects can radiate far beyond the one touched by a miracle, but that depends on whether we are open to changing our paradigm -- our analytical presuppositions. I am left with these questions: how do we need to adjust our thinking to leave room for the work of God among us? And perhaps more importantly, how do we make time to perceive how those works are affecting us? I think we may need more love and mercy -- and patience -- while we change our personal database and analytical approach. Thanks be to God.

