

I really didn't know much about *Ferdinand the Bull* before I saw an advertisement for the animated film last year and figured that it would be a good fit for this *Faith in Film* series. I knew it was a children's story, but I don't think I had ever read it. I don't even remember it as a kid, but a young adult in this congregation said it was a favorite of hers growing up.

I had no idea that the book *The Story of Ferdinand* was first published in 1936. Munro Leaf, the author, came up with the short story as an opportunity for his friend, artist Robert Lawson, to do the illustrations. It's said that he wrote it in less than one hour. Leaf used a bull as the focus because other animals like dogs, rabbits, and mice had already been done.

This simple story became a best-selling book within a year - much to the surprise of a lot of people, and I didn't know that the book created so much controversy! In 1936, when the book was published, the Spanish Civil War had just started, and much of the rest of the world was on the cusp of war. Some read the book as a critique of fascism in Spain. Some read it as an endorsement of pacifism – Ferdinand “wouldn't fight and be fierce.”

One writer for *The New Yorker* said in January 1938, “Ferdinand has provoked all sorts of adult after-dinner conversations. Some say he's a rugged individualist, some say he's a ruthless Fascist who wanted his own way and got it, others say the tale is a satire on sit-down strikes—you see the idea.” It seems that everyone had an opinion and interpretation.

Apparently the publisher wanted to hold off from putting the book out, but Munro and Lawson pushed forward. Even when the publisher didn't put much advertising behind it, the book became popular. *Ferdinand* merchandise showed up in stores, and you know it's big when there's a Ferdinand float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and a float in the Rose Parade.

And *Ferdinand* was big enough to reach world leaders. Adolf Hitler called it “degenerate democratic propaganda,” and it's said that the book was banned and burned in Nazi Germany. The book also brought questions about gender roles and connections between pacifism and masculinity. *Why wouldn't a bull want to fight?* (I hope you sense my sarcasm.) The story even touched the world of psychology and psychoanalysis.

President Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were fans of the book. By 1938, Disney had an Academy Award for a cartoon adaptation of the story. When asked, Leaf said that he wrote it as a story for children, but that with its popularity, maybe it was for adults, too. *The Story of Ferdinand* reached farther than anyone anticipated.

And you might know that this new version of *Ferdinand* has been nominated for Best Animated Feature Film. Obviously, Disney knew the power of the story more than 80 years ago. But animated films are still a force to be reckoned with. They have a huge

audience, and they bring in a lot of money - to date *Ferdinand* has grossed \$239 million worldwide.

One current headline reads: “If you like the movie, you’ll love the book.” Certainly the book doesn’t have all of the characters like the film, and the story has been given lots more details, but the message hasn’t changed. There’s a basic message of being yourself and not bowing to what anyone thinks or expects when it’s not true to who you are.

I believe the author’s claim that he wrote it as a story for children, but we know that those stories speak to everyone. It made me think a lot about expectations: what others expect of me, what I expect of myself, what I expect from others, and how all of that ties into our faith in Jesus Christ.

It’s easy to say that we don’t worry about what others expect, but we do. It’s easy to say that we don’t have expectations for others, but we do. In this age of social media – how many “likes” I can get, how many people comment or look at my Snapchat, how many people “re-tweet” – we’re in the midst of dealing with expectations. Whether it’s because of how we look, where we come from, our personal history, our struggles, or other factors, expectations are real. Ferdinand is a bull, and the expectation is that bulls fight. “That’s what bulls do” is a line from the film, but Ferdinand doesn’t want to fight. He’d rather smell the flowers.

Maybe you grew up with expectations from your parents or family. I know I’ve said, “That’s not what we do in this house.” or “This is what we do in our family.” I know I’ve said, “I don’t care what so-and-so does or doesn’t do; I’m not that kid’s mom!”

I remember feeling the weight of my parents’ expectations or the expectations from my teachers. It wasn’t necessarily always a bad thing. I think a lot about my role as spouse, parent, and pastor - and the expectations that come with all of it. You have your own. We all deal with them.

So what do we do when they’re unrealistic expectations? What do we do when our expectations for ourselves don’t serve us well - and actually cause us to think less of ourselves than we should? What do we do when the expectations that others have for us are not life-giving or helpful? How do we center ourselves first as beloved children of a loving God who calls us into relationship and wants to offer us life, hope, peace, and joy?

All of us deal with expectations. From within ourselves. From outside ourselves. From the One we seek to follow and serve. The journey of faith is about living our lives authentically, embracing our faith with honesty and integrity, and celebrating that God calls us to be who we are - finding our identity not in what anyone else places on us, but in how God sees us as beloved and claimed, forgiven and free, always growing and seeking to be more like Jesus Christ.

Certainly people had expectations for Jesus. They thought they knew what he was going to do and how he was going to do it - overthrow the Roman authorities with might and power. In Mark's Gospel, we read this exchange that comes just after Jesus asks the disciples two important questions.

First, “Who do people say that I am?” What are people saying? What have you heard? And they answer – it's easy enough to tell what others are saying about Jesus. Their answer is John the Baptist, Elijah, or a prophet. We're good at spreading others' words; gossip gets around.

But then Jesus asks them, “Who do you say I am?” When Peter answers that Jesus is the Christ - the Messiah - the One they've been waiting for, Jesus tells them not to say anything. It's then that Jesus tells them about what will happen - the expectations they should have - rather than the expectations they do have.

Suffering, rejection by those in religious authority, and death - that's what's ahead for him. And when Peter calls Jesus out, Jesus equates Peter to the same One who tempted him in the wilderness - the One who offered him a way out. “This can't be right, Jesus!”

When I consider what God expects of us, my mind goes to a couple of Scriptures. First from Micah 6: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?* Or Jesus' words from the Gospel: the greatest commandment is to *love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength - and love your neighbor as you love yourself.* I'm comfortable with those words. They feel good.

I'll confess that Jesus' words to the disciples in Mark 8 aren't the easiest expectations to hear. *Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Give your life for others in order to experience real life.* These aren't easy expectations to embrace. These aren't simple things to do.

Now Peter has the right title for Jesus, but the wrong understanding of what “Christ” means. Jesus' explanation of Messiah isn't what Peter signed up for. His expectations are different. He envisions a Liberator. The Messiah is supposed to usher in a new beginning as a ruler and conqueror.

And sometimes we share Peter's vision. We want a powerful God who controls the world. I feel that way with the state of the world. I've quoted from the prophet Isaiah: “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” God, come and fix this mess.

We want a powerful God – not God who shows weakness and vulnerability. But that's who we worship in Jesus Christ – God who knows human need and died for us. God who gives us hope for new life even amid illness, divorce, pain, and grief. Sin, suffering, and death aren't the last word because Jesus is alive! Jesus offers the promise of resurrection, but it's hard to get past the deny yourself and take up your cross!

But to call Jesus “Messiah” compels us to act. This exchange between Jesus and Peter is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Now the focus is on Jesus' suffering and

death. Perhaps Peter was attracted to what he saw in Jesus’ ministry: popularity, excitement, and power. We’re attracted to Jesus’ power – what we can gain and what benefits we get from faith. But do we think that we can follow Jesus without making any changes in our lives?

We want to soften this call for decision and action from Jesus, and we have! We downplay the cost of discipleship when Jesus calls for a reorientation of our whole lives – not just one day out of the week, but every day! Claiming Jesus and seeking to follow him means that we’re asking for God’s perspective to break through our human understanding and take us deeper in relationship with God so that every day we’re following God’s way more closely, we’re seeking God’s will more readily, and we’re living by God’s values more visibly.

Pastor Christopher Henry says that though the question of accepting Jesus is important, perhaps there’s another question that we need to ask ourselves. Faith is about confession – absolutely, but Henry asks, if we accept Jesus in our hearts, what did you do with him once he got there?

It’s not enough for Peter to claim Jesus as Christ. We’d rather conquer suffering than embrace it. *You will have to sacrifice and say “no” to what you want. There will be suffering – going against what the crowd says and does, struggling with difficult relationships, and even keeping faith in the midst of really hard times.* It means standing up for God and trusting God in the hardest moments. It’s a serious commitment to servanthood and giving up for the sake of others. It’s a serious commitment to standing for justice and speaking up.

I continue to think about all that’s going on in the world, and more particularly, in our state. The trial of Larry Nassar is all over the news, and all of the survivors of abuse have been given the opportunity to speak directly to Nassar. I was challenged by the witness of some of the survivors who prayed for him and actually spoke of God’s forgiveness to him. It doesn’t undo what has happened, what they have endured, or the pain he has caused. It’s a powerful witness to their faith in Christ.

Last week, I shared a quote from Henry Ward Beecher: “Greatness lies, not in being strong, but in the right using of strength...” Ferdinand speaks to “the right use of strength.” Ferdinand doesn’t sell out to others. He stays true to himself and somehow manages to encourage others to be themselves: Lupe, the calming goat and the rest of the bulls who begin to see past the expectations of others’ and embrace their uniqueness.

Today you received a flower. It’s a reminder of this sweet and simple story, but also a reminder to appreciate the small things around us and be true to ourselves. I don’t know about all of the controversy over this story, but I pray for myself and for all of us - to know that God has created us, calls us, and claims us in all of our beautiful diversity. I pray that we find our identity in God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

**Precepts:**

- “You don’t get harmony when everybody sings the same note.” Doug Floyd
- “Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.” Oscar Wilde
- “You don’t need to fight to be a fighter.” Author Unknown
- “But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7
- “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2
- “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:10