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Potential

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Famed actor Sidney Poitier wrote a reflective autobiography many years ago, and two sentences in particular caught my attention. He wrote about growing up poor in the Bahamas and his experiences upon moving to the United States, including living through the Civil Right movement of the 1960's. He encapsulated the challenges of his life in two powerful lines, "The reining in of expectations was the centerpiece of the outside world's overall message, and it came through loud and clear. Limits had been defined, had been written into law and imposed on me long before I was even born."¹ For Poitier, those limits came about because of the color of his skin, his nationality, and his poverty.

Poitier's words drew me up short, as I wondered about the limits we impose on people before they are even born.

In the curious eyes and tiny balled-up fists of a newborn, we see potential. The world's possibilities are open at birth to this tiny one. When the Lord first called to Jeremiah, we read, "'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'" (Jer. 1:4-5 NRSV). Before he was even born, the expectations for Jeremiah's life were unlimited and full of potential. While we won't all be appointed as "prophets to the nations," I believe that we are all called and given gifts to glorify God. Full of potential. Consecrated. Without limits.

This past weekend, I helped my daughter sort through my grandson's clothing to see what would make good hand-me-downs for my granddaughter. I found myself rejecting the sweatshirt patterned with football helmets. The t-shirt with a front-loader also went by the wayside. Too boyish. My granddaughter is just over 1 year old, and I've already defined roles for her based on her gender when she took her first breath. Dinosaurs might be okay, but earth-moving equipment is not.

In what ways do we rein in people's expectations and hopes? How often do I assume someone's incapacity based on their disability or culture or education? What laws or norms restrict others – even before they are born – from living into their God-given potential?

In recent years, we've witnessed a lot of "firsts": the first person to climb Mt. Everest without sight, the first international superstar model with Down Syndrome, the first black woman nominated to the Supreme Court, and more. I celebrate those breakthroughs, but I grieve them as well. How exhausting to always be the first! At what point will we move from reining in expectations to expecting inclusivity?

Potential, derived from the Latin *potentia* "power, might, force." Power not actualized, but in waiting.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

¹ Poitier, S., *The Measure of a Man, a Spiritual Autobiography*, p. 208 (Harper Collins 2000).