

Rejected
Menno Mennonite Church
January 30, 2022

Purpose: To explore God's initiative in coming to us, even when rejection is possible.

Message: The challenge of the Gospel is always greater than we are prepared for, yet God still comes.

Scripture: Luke 4:21-30 (I will read); Jeremiah 1: 4-10 (Supplementary)

Synopsis: Jesus dealt with rejection. Likely more than we can fully appreciate. We see him dealing with disappointment throughout the Scriptures: at the death of Lazarus, the physical and psychological pain of the passion, the lament that he has over Jerusalem's ability to embrace that which makes for peace. Here, we are given him encountering this from those who knew him best. Yet, he is fully unsurprised for it.

The Gospel in its challenges will always cause us nervousness, and pull us, perhaps, to doubt its application to us and that which we care about. This is human nature. Christ's nature is revealed in that he keeps coming to us, even when we find ourselves rejecting that which he offers.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ Then he began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² All spoke well of him
and were amazed at the gracious words
that came from his mouth.
They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

²³ He said to them,
“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb,
‘Doctor, cure yourself!’
And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown
the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ”

²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.

²⁵ But the truth is,
there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah,
when the heaven was shut up three years and six months,
and there was a severe famine over all the land;

²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel
in the time of the prophet Elisha,
and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town,
and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built,
so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Do you remember the first time you asked someone out on a date? I am not talking about the middle school crush passing notes in class sort of date, but an actual I would like to get to know you with the possibility of an actual viable relationship in mind sort of date. Do you remember the abject terror of figuring out the how when and why of asking what needed to be asked, sounding interested, but not too keen, just in case it all crashes and burns? Or, if you were the one being asked, the notions and imaginations of preparing for, then going on the date, with its accompanying prospects of disconnect and disillusion? It is a scary thing to go out and put yourself on the line. Marrying late in life as we did, I had occasion to experience the wide and profoundly weird world of online dating in the early years. Each profile, each contact was a new world of imagination of the possibilities on one hand and the likelihood of things going catastrophically wrong on the other. Let me just say right here and now: disclosing your occupation as a member of the clergy is an excellent way to stop a conversation. It is amazing how quickly people disappear when they aren't quite what to do with someone who does this for a living. Online or not, the risks are real, present and always dangerous. Rejection is one of our most persistent fears when it comes to relating to other people.

So much so that is one of the most quintessential human experiences. We have all known rejection on one level or another; for the job we wanted, the school we applied to, on and on. We will never spend a whole lot time talking about the it, but those moments of rejection or feared rejection can be some of the most impactful moments of the human condition. Which makes me wonder how Jesus felt about being rejected? On the inside, what does it do to you be rejected? Even more so when you happen to be the Son of God and have a pretty keen insight on the whys-and-wherefores of the behavior you are seeing and feeling for himself. The wholly God part was no doubt grieved and concerned, but how much more did the wholly human part lament the raw reality of people persistently saying no. We are acquainted with Jesus being angry at the Money changers. We know that he grieved at the loss of his friend Lazarus. We can even wonder at his anxiety and physical pain on the way to the cross. But being rejected is a whole other level of hurt.

Jesus, however he felt about it, knew rejection well and intimately. In many ways, that is defining characteristic of his ministry. Rejection goes back to the Garden of Eden where the natural impulse to control the particular overrides the abundance of having everything in the world to share. Rejection builds the golden calf in the desert and complains about manna from

heaven. Rejection turns the warnings of the prophets into one more thing to mock. It is into this that Jesus walks, talks, and is confronted by this long heritage, only to be rejected time and again, never more so than on the cross. No matter what the age or the time, human kind rejects the good news of God and insists on doing it our way, never mind the consequences. What is the opposite of repentance, the very thing that is asked for by the kingdom, then the rejection of the very need to do so?

I have to imagine that this is what cuts Jesus, and quickly. We are ready to go to great lengths to avoid rejection, or more to the point, the risk of the pain that comes with it. Coming out of the wilderness, he announces his kingdom in the terms we know well—release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, the day of the Lord’s favor for all. This part of the story, the bit we often skip over, grows out of that. Having gained some fame already for his ministry and capabilities, he has stepped up and delivered the words from Isaiah with such power and authority that the gathered sit in dumbfounded amazement. Then to hear that these words are not just the reading of the day, but have been revealed in their hearing, taking on flesh and beginning to take on flesh and reality is beyond belief. We can well imagine, though, the disbelief curdling into incredulity and outrage as they try to square the notion of what was said with who just said this—the guy they knew from down the street—and what this proclamation would mean to shake up the world. Even if they could make sense of someone that they knew so well, or though they did, making a claim of such far ranging impact, it is wrong to assume that this declaration of good news was good news to all who heard it. If he is really serious about the work of putting this plan into action, there are people in the room who are not likely thrilled by the prospect.

It is in this transition of their trying to square this circle that they responded as they did: not with questions or counterpoints to his scriptural interpretation, but with the suspicion of the familiar dismissing the incredible: “isn’t this Joseph’s son?” and the contempt bred by familiarity that goes with it. They attempt to maintain the box that Jesus just collapsed for them by what ever means that they knew. To have Jesus remain secure in his identity and explain that this is the way it is didn’t really help his way of being all that much either.

We, like the good people of Nazareth want to be awed in the sanctuary, but can be troubled when we consider the full meaning of what Jesus is proclaiming to us. What does it mean to have good news to the poor when we are not poor? Is the radical re-ordering of on earth

as it is in heaven really what we want, even if it is what we need? Our soup-kitchens are wonderful and needed, but dare we entertain the possibility, however remote, that God's intent is a world without hunger and without need in the first place. Do we seek that? Do we suspect that it might be possible? Dare we proclaim that as our hopeful vision, knowing how impossibly far we have to go for these lofty, laudable goals. Or do we, like Jesus' hometown neighbors wait for the healing miracles and marvels to start, and get frustrated when they don't?

While we haven't tried to pitch Jesus over a cliff, we each have our ways to shield ourselves from the full force and effect of the meaning of the Gospel. We qualify our love for the children of God. We protect our time and our place above that which is for others. We suspect that the grace of God comes with far more strings attached than we can ever know. Most of all, sometimes we reject the grace of God because we suspect, somewhere, that God might reject us. It is always to be preferred to be the rejector rather than the rejectee.

But here is the good news. Here is the great news. Jesus still comes. Jesus still comes and presents the Gospel as the word of God, and even more so, manifests the reality of the full gospel then and now. Our rejection of the gospel, however bruising, does not offend the ego of the divine in the Garden of Eden, in Jesus' time, or even through to today. The work of God that Jesus proclaims boldly and clearly will come to pass not out of our success in conceiving of it, or our skill in getting the world to accept it as the best way forward, though we are never excused from proclaiming with Jesus the reality of the kingdom coming. All this will come to pass because it is the will of God and YHWH has spoken it and it will come to pass. ¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Luke 4:18-19). Nazareth's rejection of this message did not stop the Jesus movement. Neither does the cross, the grave, or anything else in the fullness of time. Our rejection for want of comfort, ease, or simple avoidance will not stop it either. Neither will our fear that the world might reject us for saying such outlandish things, if we but have the courage.

Jesus comes in grace to make real the promises of God. Nazareth wanted these promises, but wanted them, ultimately for themselves. That is why the insult is Jesus saying yet again "but they are not just for you, for us and Israel, but for all those who would hear, know and believe,

and in doing so be changed along the way. Sometimes it is precisely this declaration that we need most.

F. Bryan Wilkerson tells the story of a woman in the faith community in which he served who adamantly objected to his messages, but she kept coming. He kept preaching. For a long time, the acrimony between them went unabated. He kept preaching, and she kept objecting. But, over time, something happened, and she began to soften. He had continued to pastor her, to care for her, and to treat her as a beloved member of the community. Eventually, she began to cling to the word she had rejected. Her life transformed and she became an integral part of the ministry as she began to live the gospel and participate in the liberating work of God through Christ's church. As Wilkerson states, "The Word of God can do that to a person. But sometimes, it has to undo them first."

May God's proclamation undo our impulse to reject that which we do not understand, or that which we are uncomfortable with. And in doing so, heal us, and bring the kingdom on earth as it in heaven.

May it be so, Lord, and soon.

Response Song

Be Thou My Vision (Ver. 1,2,5)

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