

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Church of the Advent
June 10, 2018

Holy Rejection



Today's lessons seem to be all about rejection. Not a happy and hopeful topic for a Summer Sunday morning sermon you might think, and you would be right. Sometimes scripture is hard, and it would be much easier to brush over the tough parts, to talk instead about those bible stories that send us a cool breeze for our fevered brows, or wrap us in a soft blanket when we most need reassurance that God is in the heavens and all's right with the world. But the Holy Word of God is more complicated than that, and since we are gifted with the brains and reason to work our way through its challenges, we might as well figure out what God might have to say to us about rejection, a dreaded but normative part of the human experience.

Rejection feels like loss, and regardless of the context—work, school, personal relationships, team sports or community life—being rejected feels like being unappreciated and unloved. It can leave people feeling hopeless when they are rejected by others for things beyond their control: their age, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, physical or mental disability, or just being poor. We can be rejected from a dream job, the best college, or by falling in love with the wrong person at the wrong time. Smaller, less dramatic rejections are a part of life that we learn to absorb and work around—not the end of the world—but *not* our heart's desire. I doubt if any of us here could name one person we know who has not experienced rejection at some point—along with the disappointment, frustration, and anger that comes with it. Rejection is the price that comes with sorting ourselves into who will lead and who will follow, who will be lawyer and who will be a chef, who will be a cheerleader and who makes it to the NFL.

We humans seem to have been programmed for competition with one another in just about every venue of life. We like knowing what side of a thing we are on—what tribe we belong to—and we measure ourselves and our worth against one another with ranking and scoring, hiring and firing, accomplishing and failing, being the *right* or *wrong* kind of people. We like and need other people, but prefer that they not challenge our world view or our worth. A world that gives value to initiative and effort, beauty and success, trying hard and winning, trains us not only to loathe rejection, but to fear it, leading us to spend more than a little energy trying to avoid it—sometimes by rejecting others—either preemptively or reactively.

From the Old Testament today we have the ancient story of Samuel, a prophet who has done his best to convey God's desire to the people of Israel—that they love the Lord their God with all their hearts, and minds and souls—to rely on God utterly. Instead, the people clamored for an *earthly* king—one who would demonstrate earthly power to fight their battles for them, a king like *other* nations had. They were tired of being rejected by their neighbors for being different. Samuel was the voice of God when he warned the Israelites about the cost of choosing an earthly king over God Almighty, and they did *not* want to hear it. They rejected Samuel, and

ignored his caution about the unintended consequences of being subjects of a king—who would conscript them into armies, tax a percentage of their grain and their flocks, enslave them for his own purposes—all risks that far exceeded any benefits they had imagined. The Israelites rejected Samuel’s advice, and the advice of many prophets to follow for generations. God told Samuel not to take it personally, because it was really *God* who was being rejected by the Israelites, not Samuel, though it is doubtful that made Samuel feel any better for sticking his neck out. In any case, Samuel did not quit his job as prophet; he hung in there—anointing Saul as King, and a generation and royal mess later, King David to replace him. And in spite of the love David had of his Lord God—love that we hear in his psalms of praise and gratitude—he made a royal mess of things, too. And so the story of the Old Testament goes, from generation to generation. The people begged for an earthly king, rejecting God and God’s prophets; the king failed them; the people paid the price for their stiff-necked stubbornness with exile and slavery. God showed mercy and sent redemption. Repeat. Repeat.

Fast forward in ancient time to Mark’s gospel—where Jesus is at the center of a story about rejection. Mark’s story takes place early in Jesus’ ministry; he has just called his closest 12 disciples, but is already being followed by crowds throughout Galilee, taunted by unclean spirits, and challenged by the authorities for his unorthodox teachings. And then he goes home to Nazareth. Was he looking for respite, recognition, validation? Or just looking for a place to ground himself close to his roots? Whatever he was looking for, what he got was crowds of people so dense that he could not rest; he could not even eat. But this did not impress either his family or the scribes who were said to have come from Jerusalem. His family thought he had lost his mind. The scribes thought he was dangerous, calling him Satan because he had the power to cast out demons. The crowds went wild in the way that crowds respond to celebrity and public spectacle, but from those whose opinion would have been important to him—his family and the religious authorities—what he got was rejection. They were not interested in his mission or his message; they just wanted him to behave himself, and not shame the family or cause consternation to the *real* teachers and preachers.

A familiar description by the prophet Isaiah of the rejection of Jesus is heard in Handel’s Messiah performed around the world in the Christmas:

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them
that plucked off the hair: He hid not His face from shame and spitting.

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows!
He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;
the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

And with His stripes we are healed. (*Isaiah 53:3-8*)

If the prophets of God, meant to bring God’s good news to the people, experienced rejection; if even Jesus Christ, who *was* the Good News sent by God for the people, experienced rejection,

then perhaps there is something for us to discern here about this hard experience in life. Could it be that we make too much of our successes and failures, our acclamations and rejections? Is it possible that by trying to control every circumstance towards a desired outcome—free of pain or distress—for ourselves and those close to us, that we tune out the prophets in our midst? Is it possible that our own deep fear of loss of acceptance and belonging sends us to places where we lose sight of the ways we reject others—places where we forget what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves? Or maybe the point is to remember that we were never meant to be perfect creatures, and that our God loves us and shows us mercy anyway—and always. Maybe these stories are about taking a longer view, as Paul does, when he says we are not to lose heart...

for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (*1 Corinthians 4:17-18*)

Paul is not to be taken for Pollyanna here; rather he is arguing that it is not our *outer selves* that are important—those selves we show the world while we wait for acceptance or rejection. Rather it is our *inner nature* that is being renewed day by day by the grace and mercy of a God who never rejects us—whom he made in his own image—regardless of what the world says, and no matter how many times *we reject God* for those earthly kings we think might save us. So we do not lose heart, no matter what. Even in the face of failure and rejection, our faith allows us to take a breath, take the long view, and grow in love and compassion for others, because we *know what rejection feels like, and we know we are loved and accepted by the only One that counts—the God who made us, redeemed us, and sustains us.*

Our hard task is not to despair when rejection crosses our path, but to understand its place in our longer journey, to stay aware of the impact of our rejection of others, to rely on God whose love is always true, and to listen to the prophets and the poets who risk rejection to offer us messages of hope. I will close with one of those messages from Leonard Cohen's *Anthem*:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.¹

Amen.

¹ Leonard Cohen, *Anthem* from *The Essential Leonard Cohen*, 1992, Sony BMG Music Entertainment