

## “Rejected”

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March 29, 2015 Palm Sunday, Year B

Mark 11:1-11      Psalm 118:19-29      Mark 15:25-32

When my youngest daughter was in middle school, she was rejected by her best friend. And then this friend, in true middle-school style, turned all her other friends against her as well. Suddenly my daughter had no one to hang out with during lunch and after school, and she was hurt and bewildered. This happened just about the same time I took on a full time job here, after being a mostly stay-at-home mom while my kids were young. I didn't *really* abandon her, but I wasn't always there in the same way, and it was a shaky time. My daughter had other problems to deal with as well, but she managed, by God's grace. It also helped that she is attractive and smart, and had an intact family. We didn't always know how to help her, but at least we tried.

Imagine being a young person who is rejected and bullied by your peers, and then your parents kick you out of the house. It happens to many lesbian and gay teenagers, even today. At least 20% of homeless youth are LGBT. And half of them suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. They have been abused at some point, and left home because their parents rejected them. It's a similar story for young people who struggle with a hidden disability or a mental illness, and don't have family that understands and can get the help they need. These young people are blamed for all their problems and they can also end up on the street, rejected and abandoned.

Most human beings go through some period of feeling rejected in this life – a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, a divorce, getting fired from a job. This week high school seniors are hearing back from colleges, and some colleges will reject them. But it's a different story to be rejected by society and abandoned by family and friends. Our country is slowly becoming more open and affirming of people who are different. But as we saw last week in Indiana, states are still making laws to allow people to discriminate against gay people. Ask any gay or transgender person, or anyone with a hidden disability, whether they have experienced rejection, and they will *all* have devastating stories to tell. Some of these stories include being driven out of a church.

You don't have to search far to find people of color who also have stories of being excluded, discriminated against or rejected. Just this week we learned that the racist chant that got a fraternity banned at the University of Oklahoma was not an isolated incident. The leaders had learned it at a *national meeting* of the fraternity, and they brought it back to Oklahoma where they taught it to everyone, using it as part of the formal pledge process for new students.\* I don't believe overt racism is part of any national fraternity's *official* policy. But it's still out there. And people still feel the effects.

This morning we read Psalm 118 with Soon Hee, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Jesus quoted this verse when he argued with the Pharisees in Jerusalem (Mk. 12:10-12). And the people shouted a different part of this Psalm as Jesus paraded into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna! (which means Save us! Hallelujah!)”

Jesus was marching into the city where he would be rejected by the religious leaders and killed. While some people recognized Jesus as a prophet, and maybe even believed he could be the Messiah, others saw only a man who threatened the peace by drawing large crowds of followers. We will read the story this week, on Maundy Thursday in the evening, and on Good Friday at noon, the story of Jesus' betrayal and arrest, his trial, his crucifixion and his death.

Why did people reject him? It's not as simple as "the good guys versus the bad guys." Some of the religious leaders genuinely disagreed with Jesus, while others were offended that Jesus was working outside the system, preaching to people who were sinners, forgiving them on his own and welcoming them. For some people this may have been too much change, too fast.

Others were genuinely afraid of a Roman crackdown. The Romans were known to crucify hundreds of people at a time, to intimidate everyone if they believed an uprising was brewing. Who would want to get caught up in that and risk crucifixion? A few zealots and bandits were not intimidated and were plotting to fight anyway. What if Jesus was one of them? Most people did NOT want to take the risk. The Romans were brutal.

Still, Jesus didn't allow other people's acceptance or rejection of him determine how he would act in the world. He was true to what God called him to be and do, regardless of popular opinion. And we all know how quickly popular opinion can change. One day people were waving branches, shouting hosanna, and listening to Jesus with delight (Mk. 12:37). The chief priests and scribes wanted him arrested, but Jesus was so popular they were afraid arresting him would start a riot. Still, a few days later the crowd called for his crucifixion. Then, as Jonathan read from chapter 15 this morning, they walked by as he hung on the cross, shaking their heads, mocking and ridiculing him.

Isaiah had written hundreds of years earlier, "He was despised and rejected ... a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account." (Is 53:3). God knows what it's like to be rejected. It happened to almost all of God's prophets. And it happened to Jesus. Even his friends deserted him in the end.

The fact is, it's not easy for anyone to carry out God's will in a sinful world. And it's not easy to follow Jesus, even today. Most of us do a poor job of it, even though we are far removed from the dangers that Jesus and his disciples faced in Jerusalem. Many pastors I know throw up their hands in despair over how to get their people to come out even one night for an extra worship service during Holy Week. No one's going to arrest us for going to church. But even here, we get maybe 20 people, from our church of over 100, to come out on Maundy Thursday.

Now I know that going to church is not the same as following Jesus. There's much more to it than that. Going to church is the easy part. To really follow Jesus is a challenge. Love your enemies? Sell all and give to the poor? Whoever wants to be great must be a servant? These are hard sayings. Who can live up to them?

Sadly, few of us do. I think of the people in Indiana who want to reserve the right to refuse service to gays and lesbians, based on their religious beliefs. It reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi when he lived in South Africa. Gandhi was a wise man from India, a Hindu leader who advocated non-violence in India's struggle for independence. At one

point he was interested in Christianity. He admired Jesus and often quoted from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But when Gandhi tried to visit a church in South Africa, he was turned away at the door, because of his race.\*\* There's a big difference between following Jesus, and being a member of a church.

If we *truly* follow Jesus, it will change our lives. We will be stretched and challenged to engage the world and love. We may be rejected for it. But God lifts up the despised and rejected and gives us life.

I grew up in a Presbyterian Church, but I never really believed in God as a child. I said my prayers at night, but to me it was more like reciting a poem, or talking to my stuffed animals. I didn't see any evidence that my parents believed in God either. They were good people and my mother went to church and brought us with her. But to me it seemed more of a social thing than anything spiritual. I didn't see any need for God, and had little interest.

But when I was a teenager and I met some people who took Jesus seriously, who listened to his words and lived them. I was amazed and impressed. These people were alive with the spirit and they were incredibly warm and loving. So I started paying attention to Jesus, and welcomed him into my life. I began to find meaning in life as I reached out and connected with other people and with God. I came alive inside and discovered God's kingdom right here, in our midst, even in suffering and pain.

And I heard the message that everyone is important in God's sight. Everyone. There were many people in that fellowship who lived on the fringes of society: a blind girl who was epileptic, some young men who struggled with their sexual orientation, a teenager who was beaten up and abused at home, a few black foster kids who dropped out of high school, and a crazy bearded man who spoke in tongues. They all sat together with a little old lady nun, a businessman who always wore a suit and tie, and a quiet mother who always made room for one more at her table. There were many more people, and so many stories of rejection to tell. Yet everyone was important there, and loved. As a shy kid who got lost in a family of four girls, I took that message to heart. I was somebody who mattered to God.

"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." In ancient times the cornerstone was the large stone at the bottom of two major walls in a building. It united both walls and was the starting point, the foundation from which the builders start fitting all the others stones in place.

In God's kingdom, Jesus is that cornerstone. He was rejected by the world. He still is rejected today, even sometimes by Christians. But God raises him up and brings him back with a message of forgiveness and love. And that is the foundation on which we build our own lives, and the life of the church.

As we enter Holy Week, may we make room in our hearts for this despised and rejected messenger of God, our Savior. And may we reach out to the world with the message that every single person matters to God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

\* "University of Oklahoma Unveils Racist Chant Probe Findings" by Sean Murphy, The Associated Press, reported on <http://abcnews.go.com>.

\*\* as reported by Dibin Samuel, "Mahatma Gandhi and Christianity," in Christianity Today, August 14, 2008.

