

THE FEAR OF REJECTION¹
Luke 4: 16-30
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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It always hurts. We smile; we say that it is OK; we may even laugh and act like we don't really care. But it hurts. Rejection is one of the worst of pains. Maybe you feel it right now. If not now, we all know what it feels like because we have all experienced it: the pain of rejection.

I

Last Thursday, the day after Alabama's strict new anti-immigration law went into affect, 223 Hispanic children in Mobile, Alabama came to Foley Elementary School crying and afraid. Another 39 were absent, afraid to come to school. Here were little children, many of whom were born in the US, afraid of the rejection they would experience because they went to school in this country. The same thing happened in other schools in that state. In Huntsville, over 200 children of Hispanic origin failed to show up for school.² How is it that punishing children for their parents' choices or the color of their skin or the language they speak makes moral sense? And how can it be that causing children to be afraid to come to school is good for society?

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² Mobile *Press-Register*, September 30, 2011.

And how is it good for society that almost 42% of all homeless youth in the United States are gay or transgendered and have experienced rejection by their families? For many of these youth, that rejection leads to depression and sometimes suicide.³ And when some of these youth, who have deep religious faith, turn to the church for help, they are sometimes rejected again—this time by a religious body that claims to speak for God and may have nurtured them since birth. It is rejection compounded by rejection. When Robert Frost wrote that “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in,”⁴ he wasn’t thinking about the thousands of rejected teens who are thrown out of their homes or feel unsafe in their homes.

On the other end of the lifespan, there are also thousands of parents who have been rejected by their children. Over half a million reports of elderly abuse reach authorities each year, and millions more go unreported. It can be physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, financial exploitation, or healthcare fraud, but it is rejection.⁵ Rejection hurts just as much when you are 90 as when you are 9. Our church can take pride in the fact that we established and still lead in the Briarwood Continuing Care

³ www.sun-sentinal.com, “Gay Teens Rejected by Their Families Often Face Homelessness,” Feb. 25, 2007.

⁴ Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man.”

⁵ “Elderly Abuse and Neglect, Warning Signs, Risk Factors, Prevention, and Help,” at http://helpguide.org/mental/elder_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm.

Retirement Community. We consider Briarwood to be a vital part of our church's ministry.

Certainly, I do not need to continue giving contemporary examples. The huge number of people who have received pink slips from their employers need no illustrations of rejection! I only point these out to underline the pressing and current crises involving rejection. There are many more.

II

With the church's checkered history of rejecting people, it may be quite surprising for people to be reminded that Jesus himself was rejected by his own family and his own worshipping community. This experience of rejection had to be profoundly painful to him, and he must have talked with his disciples about it because a version of the story appears in all three of the synoptic gospels!⁶

As bad as it was to be rejected by the very people who meant the most to him, the timing also made it painful. He was on a religious roll! Just before the story about his rejection in his hometown, the scripture describes him this way: *Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to*

⁶ Mark 6: 1-6; Matthew 13: 54-58; and Luke 4: 16-30.

*teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*⁷ Everyone? Really?

That's because he had not yet been home!

When he got home to Nazareth and read the scripture in his home community, they did not see him as a religious wonder worker or even as a leader. He was the kid they knew back when.... The gospel of Matthew quotes the people as saying, *Is not this the carpenter's son? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?*⁸

Four brothers and an unknown number of sisters? Mary and Joseph apparently had a lot of children, a fact that makes us wonder how the medieval Church ever came up with the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary! But the fact is that he was rejected. The gospel of John says that early in his ministry even his brothers refused to believe in him.⁹ And the gospel of Mark says that at one time his family even *tried to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He's gone out of his mind!'*¹⁰

He knew what it was like to be rejected, and all through his ministry there were people who turned away from him. At the end of his earthly life, he faced the ultimate symbol of rejection: the death penalty. Whether it is a cross or a noose or a firing squad or lethal injection, capital punishment is the

⁷ Luke 4: 14-15

⁸ Matthew 13: 55-56.

⁹ John 7: 5.

¹⁰ Matthew 3: 21.

ultimate rejection. It says, you are so evil that you must be permanently eliminated from the face of the earth. So he died rejected.

III

Every time we listen to Handel's *Messiah*, and we hear that heart-rending alto aria, *He was despised and rejected of men...*, which quotes Isaiah 53: 3, we can understand why the early Christians read that passage from Isaiah and thought of Jesus! Here is Jesus, who was rejected and knew firsthand the pain of rejection, and yet he prayed for the very people who rejected him.

That leaves us with a mandate to stand with those who feel rejected. It leaves us with a calling to welcome the stranger, listen to their stories, and if they allow us, to get up under the burden of their rejection and help them carry the load.

Then there is the question about what to do about our own pain of rejection. Some of us live with tremendous feelings of pain and anger stemming from rejection. It does no good to say, "Just get over it; just forget it; time will heal;" or any of the other pious sounding platitudes that we tend to use when we don't know what to say.

So what do we do when we are like walking time-bombs, filled with rage over being rejected? And what do we do when we just want to get back at the

person who rejected us? It reminds me of Frederick Buechner's comment about anger. He said that of all the Seven Deadly Sins, "anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over the grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."¹¹

IV

In these hurting times, when rejection is rampant and people do and say things that break your heart; when relationships are broken and we wonder, "What will I do now?" When fear grips your heart and tightens your chest, or when the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride eats away at your soul, it is understandable that we fear rejection.

For some of us here today, perhaps rejection is not an issue. Perhaps you live in the acceptance of a loving, forgiving, caring, comforting God, your life is filled with the intimate presence of Christ, and you may have a great ministry to those who are feeling rejected and alone.

¹¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 2.

But for those who cannot describe their life that way, for those among us who do feel the pain and fear of rejection, the Christian faith offers something profound. It is not a pill you swallow or a therapy or an exercise. It is one word. That word is *grace*. That word is absolutely central to the Christian faith.

It means that God loves and accepts you just the way you are. It means that there is nothing you have to do to earn that love. It means that nothing can ever separate you from that love. It means that no matter who has rejected you, God will never reject you.

There is an old saying that goes like this: “God might not show up when you want, but God is always right on time.” May this moment be the time when you reach out and accept the gift of grace.