

Facing Disappointment & Rejection

Mark 6:1-6

July 15, 2018

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A sermon preached at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
Wildwood, MO

Later this week, I am flying home to California. After living in Kansas City and St. Louis for nearly 30 years, it sounds strange to keep calling California home – but in so many ways, California remains home for me.

Ideas about home shift and change throughout life, but there is still something sacred about visiting the places of our youth – the streets where I rode my bike, the parking lot at the high school, the theater where I took my first date, stadium where our marching band practiced over and over, and over again.

“Home,” wrote Robert Frost, “is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”¹ Home is the place where we know we are safe and secure. Today, as Mark reminds us, Jesus comes home—but for Jesus, Nazareth it is anything but a place where he feels safe and accepted.

One Sunday before my second year in seminary, my home church asked me to preach. It was the first – and only – time that I have preached a Sunday sermon in that church. I’m not sure what to make of that, but perhaps it speaks for itself!

Standing in that pulpit, I felt a twinge of what Jesus may have felt. I looked around and saw friends I had grown up with. I am sure they were reviewing the many times in my life where I appeared to them to be not terribly holy. My parents, of course, and my brother and sister in law were there. There were children for whom I had babysat, and my old piano teacher, a handful of teachers from the school district, and a woman sitting on the front row whose name I did not know, but who was trimming her toenails while waiting for me to start preaching. It was a rather auspicious occasion.

¹ Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man.”

I do not recall much from that sermon. I'm sure it was not a moment of remarkable homiletical craftsmanship. But it did not seem to matter, because afterwards I was treated to rounds of hugs and compliments. It was a bit like the way the late Will Campbell described the time he preached at his home church. Campbell was an activist, a farmer, and a self-described "whiskey-drinking Baptist preacher." In his book, "Brother to a Dragonfly," Campbell describes the congregation's reaction to his sermon: "I could have denounced Christianity as a capitalist myth cunningly designed to keep the masses under control and our youth choir could have sung Ukrainian Folk Songs and our Sunday school teacher could have lectured on Darwin's "Origin of the Species" and all the people would have said, "Amen!"²

Home is the place where when you preach, they have to listen.

But that is not Jesus' experience. Going home, for Jesus, was anything but a loving reunion. According to Luke, the people of Nazareth were so enraged by Jesus' sermon that they immediately formed a mob to throw him off a cliff. Mark omits those details and instead retells the story emphasizing the town's nearly unanimous rejection of Jesus' message.

That's the first thing that captures our attention: those who knew him best were among the first to reject Jesus. As Fr. James Martin puts it, "When they saw Jesus stand up in the gathering on the Sabbath, some of those in attendance in Nazareth may have thought, 'There is my friend Jesus. I wonder what he'll say. He always has something interesting to say about Scripture. Or, I wonder where Jesus has been for the last few weeks. Someone said something about the desert. He's probably thinking about joining the Baptist – he's always been devout. Or, there is Mary and Joseph's son. I remember him when he was a little boy, and even before, when there was all that trouble over his birth. Or perhaps, "There's my carpenter. I haven't seen him for a few weeks. I wonder when he's going to start that job!"³

Jesus stands and begins to teach. The crowd listens – but his sermon is not filled with funny one liners or cute stories about the time his friends pulled a fast one on their teacher. He isn't regaling them with stories about learning how to be

² Will D. Campbell, "Brother to A Dragonfly," p. 66.

³ James Martin, S.J., "Jesus: A Pilgrimage," p. 127 (Kindle).

a carpenter. He's not even paying attention to his own mother, his brothers, or his sister.

Instead, he speaks with wisdom, and heart-piercing truth. He speaks with power. He invites them to hear the Good News of salvation, to turn away from selfishness and closed-minded self-protection and to embrace God's way of loving in the world. He tells them, "The Kingdom of God is here!"

Their eyes widen, their jaws drop. Who is this man? Where did he learn this stuff?

Their rejection of Jesus is nearly automatic. Mark says, "He was unable to do any miracles there." Seized with disbelief, the crowd turns its back on Jesus.

Whenever we experience rejection, it is a bit like stumbling into a deadly trap. It is a snare whose teeth rip into our spirits. The sharp fangs of rejection pierce our souls, bleeding us dry.

A woman I knew had been suffered terribly when the church where she had been a long-time member decided she was no longer needed. She had served for many years in a prominent volunteer capacity. As she was thinking about retiring, someone beat her to the punch and demanded that she quit. She felt betrayed. Humiliated. Rejected. It was a tremendous blow emotionally, and a deeply painful act of public humiliation.

A man that I knew had been the CEO of a good-sized corporation. He had an enormous ego, and a well-deserved reputation acting bigger than his britches. He surrounded himself with all sorts and trappings of power. It was a bit over the top, and one day the board of directors found the gumption to fire him. Some said he got what was coming to him, but you still could see how the physical pain of rejection had been etched on his face and in his soul.

He was depleted by rejection. He retreated out of the light, and we rarely saw him again.

For Jesus, the rejection comes just as quick. It is a fierce thumb's down vote of the Gospel, a turning away from the promises God yearns to provide. The Nazarenes cannot comprehend this business of God's kingdom being present in

the here and now. “The kingdom of God? Present in this man? How can it be? This guy – this son of the carpenter – is Messiah? Impossible.”

So Jesus leaves, reminding the disciples that “prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometown, among their relatives, and in their own households.”

Rejection is among the most difficult experiences we face. When researchers placed patients in an MRI and asked them to recall a recent experience of being rejection. They discovered that our brains are hardwired to perceive rejection in the same way we perceive pain. When patients recalled an experience of rejection, the researchers found that when we recall an experience of rejection, it lights up a part of our brain most commonly associated with physical pain. Rejections, no matter how small or large, prompt a physical reaction within us. Dealing with rejection is not so much a matter of developing a thicker skin but rather understanding that we are hard wired to feel rejection on a very deep level.⁴

We could call it “being kicked off the island.”⁵ When our own tribe rejects us, the experience is one akin to fear, a death sentence. I bet you can still recall the time you didn’t get the job you wanted, or the phone call you had expected, or the invitation. It is a frightening experience, and if you are like I am, worries about rejection or deep disappointment haunt your nightmares.

The fear of that hurt is paralyzing.

But notice Jesus’ response. Jesus does not fall into the trap that so often accompanies rejection and disappointment. As his friends and neighbors fall into cycles of fear and prepare to attack him, Jesus remains in what some call a “less anxious position.” He is not drawn into either their anxiety nor is he paralyzed by his own self-loathing. He remains, as James Martin says, free.

And in his freedom, he moves forward in hope, allowing his spirit to be filled by the mission God has called him to pursue. Jesus remains focused on what

⁴ Guy Winch, “Why rejection hurts so much, and what to do about it,” December 5, 2005, ideas.ted.com

⁵ Ibid.

God has called him to do. In a very real way, it is only when he is rejected that Jesus can find “home.”

I know from my own experiences that it is easy to fall into the traps set by rejection. We want to be liked, and it is painful when the snare of rejection snaps into our soul. It cuts through the sinew of our self. When we are rejected, we suffer. When we work hard on a project or a business and the opportunity falls apart, it can unleash waves of self-loathing and self-doubt. How can we be sure that we are doing what we are called to do?

That is the trap. It’s a bit like those traps from the old cartoons where the sneaky coyote would try to catch the unpredictable roadrunner. When we fall into those traps, the response is predictable: we fall into doubt, anger, and frustration.

Notice Jesus’ response. While he’s not offering an ointment that takes away the sting of rejection, he does manage to reframe the situation. Amazed by their disbelief, Jesus nonetheless is undeterred. He pushes forward, trusting his mission. He is not drawn into the anxiety or fear he sees. Instead, he knows that his true home is the kingdom – and it is to that kingdom, that realm where God’s love and grace surrounds us, that disciples are called.

Frustrations, disappointments, setbacks, and so much more will happen to us in life. But the very good news is this: our ultimate home is in Jesus Christ. And his grace is sufficient. Amen.