

Rejected for Jesus

Luke 4:16-30

It's hard to be liked by everyone. Earlier this week, Yankees closer Mariano Rivera became the first person to enter the Baseball Hall of Fame unanimously. That's a feat no other great baseball player had done; not Babe Ruth, not Willie Mays, not Hank Aaron. For some, it's easy to know why they weren't liked. Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds have the shadow of using performance enhancing drugs hanging over them, and so their greatness seems tainted. Pete Rose will never enter the Hall of Fame, despite being one of the greatest hitters of all time, because he was caught betting on baseball games he played in.

It's hard to be liked by everyone in other areas, too. Democratic candidates running for president have begun declaring their candidacies, and now their records are being examined with a fine toothed comb to see what skeletons are in their closets. Senator Kamala Harris from California is facing scrutiny for her work as a prosecutor. Tulsi Gabbard from Hawaii is facing challenges about her anti-gay stances earlier in her political career and her views on Syria. Elizabeth Warren is facing scrutiny about her claimed Native American heritage, both from those who think she unfairly used it to get ahead and from Native Americans who think her efforts to clear her name have muddied the waters.

But when you get discouraged that not everyone likes you, you can be encouraged; even Jesus wasn't liked by everyone. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is back in his hometown. He's back in his hometown synagogue, local boy who made it big. This should be an easy group for him to impress.

But that familiarity is part of the problem. Although most stories about Jesus growing up are fanciful and apocryphal, you can imagine that people growing up with him would still hold grudges. Even if his sinlessness didn't mean that he easily got all A's or made every basketball shot he tried, that didn't mean that others wouldn't be jealous of him. They'd also remember him as the son of Joseph, and wonder how a common laborer could now be a rabbi. They might remember the gossip surrounding his birth, and the disdain that comes with such rumors.

The problem arises as Jesus reads from Isaiah, and then declares "Today, this has been fulfilled in your presence." Like us, the people of Nazareth in Jesus' day were captive to sin, even if they didn't realize it. They needed to hear Jesus' proclamation of freedom and release. They were poor, captive, blind, oppressed. Instead of rejoicing that they are free, they remain trapped in their preconceptions of who Jesus is. They wonder how the son of the carpenter they've watched grow up could have such pride and make such claims. And when Jesus tries to free them from those preconceptions, as well, they react by trying to throw him off of a cliff.

Jesus knew the servant of God who Isaiah predicted would come and preach good news to the poor would also be rejected. The servant of God would be stricken, smitten, and afflicted. Jesus encounters that when he reminds the people of Nazareth that although they are God's chosen people, they are not the only ones God loves. God's love extended in the Old Testament to Gentiles, non-Jews. After the reforming work of Ezra and Nehemiah, that had been forgotten. In Jesus, God's love would extend to the whole world once again.

The attempt to throw Jesus off the hill may not have been the first time someone attempted to kill Jesus; that "honor" goes to King Herod killing the children of Bethlehem. It was, however, the first time someone tried to kill Jesus for what he said. And it wouldn't be the last.

Jesus would continue to preach and teach, which would lead others to reject him, or even try to kill him. Pharisees rejected him for healing on the Sabbath, ignoring their cleanliness rules, and eating with tax collectors and sinners. The crowds rejected him after he told them he wouldn't keep miraculously feeding them with bread, but would instead give them his body to eat. The rich young man rejected Jesus after being told he had to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. Finally, his preaching and teaching would lead to the cross. After false witnesses couldn't agree on their testimonies, two finally agreed Jesus had said he'd destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Others claimed he had rejected Caesar and was trying to set himself up as a king.

But there, on the cross, is where Jesus' mission that he announced in Nazareth was completed. In his death on the cross, he freed the captives and the oppressed. He opened the eyes of those blinded by sin to see God's grace. He showed God's favor, God's grace, was free and available to all who believed in him.

As Jesus sent out his disciples to continue to spread that good news, they'd be rejected. After all, the message of the cross is, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). But not all would reject it. The message of the cross, for "those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

The message continues to be rejected. Sometimes it's rejected because of the hypocrisy of Christians. Author and priest Brennan Manning wrote "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." A recent LCMS study of young people found that from those who responded who had been LCMS and were no longer, their reasons were: lack of care for them by their church at a time of crisis; feeling that the LCMS is exclusionary, unwelcoming or dismissive, including to them personally; disagreeing with the LCMS on social issues; lack of support/opportunities for them to get involved; preferring a different kind of worship; and finding people in the LCMS to be "inauthentic."

But while the message is rejected, and the messengers are rejected, the message still needs to be proclaimed. There are still poor who need to have good news preached to them, still captives and oppressed people who need to hear words of freedom. And so, while we may be rejected for sharing the message of Jesus, we should not reject those who need to hear that message. The LCMS Youth Ministry research team said that while we shouldn't change doctrine to reach lost millennials, we should remember the importance of "careful listening so that church leaders and ministers are equipped to defend doctrine while compassionately engaging ... this diverse generation."

Following Jesus and sharing his message may get you rejected. This past week we celebrated the life of Rev Martin Luther King, Jr, who 95% of people now view

positively. While he was doing his work of ending segregation, however, only 32% of people viewed him positively.

None of us will be unanimously elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. None of us will probably find enough people to vote for us for president. We may be rejected by society when we speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, or when we remind others that God's love is for all people, not just those who look like us or are from our country. But we know that even when the world rejects us, God does not, and that's what matters.

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