

Rejected

Luke 20:9-20

Have you ever been rejected? You probably have. Maybe you were rejected as a kid, when people were picking teams and you were picked last. Maybe you were rejected when you tried to get that girl or that guy to dance with you. Maybe you were rejected when you applied for your top school, and instead had to go with a backup. You could all probably tell me a story of rejection, because those stories are difficult to forget. They stick with us, and make us afraid, and feel unwanted and unloved.

Throughout our lives, we experience rejection in many ways, and for many reasons. We all want to be accepted, and we feel like a failure when we're rejected.

God knows all about rejection. Jesus spends his earthly life being rejected. He was despised and rejected by his family and his neighbors. He was despised and rejected by those who should have been best prepared to listen to him. As we see today, Jesus knows the final rejection that is coming. Yet he takes on that rejection, so that we could be accepted by God.

Jesus is teaching in parables again, as he usually does. He's teaching in the temple in Jerusalem after the first Palm Sunday, entering as a king. He's also overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. He's shaking things up, and the chief priests and other religious leaders aren't thrilled about that. And so Jesus calls them out on it.

This parable, though, needs no explanation. Jesus and his hearers know that he's telling it against the chief priests, against the religious leaders. Throughout the Old Testament, a vineyard was used to describe the nation of Israel, and what God was trying to do with it. Isaiah uses a vineyard to describe how much God had done for the people of Israel, and how

they would be destroyed because they didn't produce good fruit. That came to pass when the people of Israel were taken off to exile in Babylon. Jesus just brings it up to date, talking about how they had continued to persecute the prophets, the servants God had sent to the tenants, and how they would soon kill him.

And this message isn't coming to some group of people who have never heard of God. It's not coming to some group of people who have only seen the sun and the stars and nature around them and made up their own stories about those things and how they came to be. This is coming to people who have heard the story of how God made them his people again and again and again. And yet they still reject him.

In fact, this shows perhaps the central theme of Scripture; God wants us, but we don't want God. God comes to His people again and again. And they reject Him again and again. God comes to us. And we reject Him, too.

The people of Israel had rejected God throughout their history. Despite seeing all that God had done for them in bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, they rejected God and worshipped a golden calf. Despite God bringing them into the land he had promised them, they went astray and worshipped the false idols of their neighbors. Despite God giving them prosperity, they worshipped their wealth. And when the prophets came to call them back to God, they rejected the prophets, as well.

Now, they continued to reject God. God had been silent since Malachi had been the last prophet. The chief priests and teachers of the law had become more concerned with keeping their own power than following God's commands.

The chief priests knew Jesus was talking about them. And instead of hearing the parables as calls for them to repent, they only hardened their hearts. They ramped up their plans to arrest and kill Jesus. Their rejection of God intensified.

When we hear parables like these, it's easy to focus on God's judgment and wrath. What they really point us to, though, is God's mercy. The mercy that kept sending prophets to call the people to repentance. The mercy that sent Jesus into the world to be rejected. The mercy that sent Jesus to the cross. The mercy that expanded the kingdom of God to all people.

Prophets weren't all doom and gloom, though. Our Old Testament reading shows this. Isaiah spends the first part of his book warning of the coming destruction and exile. But that's not all he says. The second half of his book looks past the destruction and exile to restoration and return. After seeing their holy city and the temple where God dwelled destroyed, their expectations of what it meant to be God's chosen people were destroyed too. They felt rejected by the God that they had rejected so many times.

Isaiah doesn't pull any punches. Yes, he said, they were being judged for their sins, for rejecting God and His commands, and the judgment was severe. But that was not God's ultimate purpose in sending the Babylonians to drag the Israelites away. The real purpose was to call them to repentance, to get their blinders off and see how they had failed to live up to their covenant with God. The purpose was to get them to open their eyes to the new way that God was working.

The chief priests don't see the new thing God is doing. All they see is their power threatened, the status quo on shaky ground, and they react. They start the plots in motion that will send

Jesus to the cross. There he will do a new thing, God taking on the punishment that we deserve for rejecting him. Then, after three days, the new thing God is doing is fully revealed, as death is defeated.

As much as we may hate to admit it, we need this message, too. We, too, reject God despite living in a country that can at least claim to be Christian. The latest surveys show that those who identify with the term evangelical can no longer best be predicted by church attendance. Instead, it comes with political affiliation. Church attendance is an afterthought. God is rejected by those who claim to follow God best.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." We still reject Jesus when following him would be difficult, when it would affect our identity, when it would affect how others see us. But Jesus went to the cross to die for all of that, too.

We may still reject God, but God keeps coming to us. God comes through His word, where we are called to repentance and receive forgiveness. God comes to us in Holy Communion, as we are welcomed to the feast. God comes to us in each other, as we love and serve and forgive each other because God has loved and forgiven and accepted us. Jesus was rejected so we could be accepted. How wonderful to be accepted by God!

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, IA
5th Sunday in Lent
April 3, 2022