

“Following Jesus, Facing Rejection”

Sunday, June 27, 2010—Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 9:51-62

*Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church*

After 23 years of being married to Mike, I don't often reflect back on my dating days. But when I do, I mostly think about how awful those days were. In particular, I remember the guys I liked, most of whose names I've long since forgotten, who weren't the least bit interested in me. The ones who said they'd call but never did, the ones who never called a second time, the ones who just made it clear I wasn't their type. Rejection is nobody's idea of a good time—that's something I think we can all agree on.

This morning we get to see how Jesus dealt with rejection. He was on his way from the hills of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, where he would lay down his life for you and me. Luke says, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, words that emphasize the resolve it must have taken to go there, knowing what was to come. On the way, he stops in a Samaritan village. You know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Think Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq today, or Israelis and Palestinians on the West Bank.

As he usually did when travelling, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him to look for food and a place to stay overnight. But it turns out the Samaritans weren't the least bit interested in his company. Jesus was a Jew, after all. We don't know how the Samaritans said it, exactly, but the message was clear enough. You're not one of us. You're an illegal alien, you don't belong here. We've got no use for you, bud, so keep moving.

James and John, the disciples who were travelling with Jesus, were incensed by this rejection. They remember how the prophet Elijah dealt with disrespectful Samaritans centuries earlier. When some Samaritans had the nerve to suggest that the king of Samaria was more powerful than God, Elijah called down fire from heaven and destroyed every single one of them, a story with which James and John were surely familiar. So they ask: “Jesus, shall we call for a bolt of lightning to come down from the sky and incinerate these miserable creatures? Shall we obliterate them all, men, women, children, along with any stray animals that happen to be around? Shall we teach them all a lesson that you are not to be trifled with, that those who reject you will face consequences? Say the word, Jesus, we're ready to blow these inhospitable louts off the face of the earth! After all, Elijah did it—it says so right in Second Kings!”

There's nothing more human than to want to strike back and get even with those who reject us. I remember the prank my roommates and I hatched in college to harass one unfortunate young man who decided, after spending some time with me, that he preferred his former girlfriend. My friends and I spent an evening filling out hundreds of coupons with his name and address, ordering all sorts of merchandise “on approval”, which meant he would have to return it after two weeks if he didn't want to keep it and pay for it. I heard from others that for weeks on end he came home to his apartment to find boxes stacked shoulder high outside his door, filled with everything from kitchen utensils to camping equipment. Later in life I would come to realize this was almost certainly a form of mail fraud, but in my youth, it was about revenge being sweet. I'm guessing a lot of us have been there.

Take a look at how Jesus responds to rejection. He doesn't take it personally; he knows it isn't about him. So he doesn't sulk and pout or whine and complain about the rudeness of those who have refused him hospitality. Instead, he turns to his friends and tells them in no uncertain terms that if they are going to follow him, they will face rejection and they will have to let go of the instinct to retaliate when they are rejected. Jesus says payback, whether it's active and aggressive or passive and indirect, is not his way.

I want you to notice something else about Jesus' response to rejection. He doesn't allow it to keep him from living God's will and God's way. He's ready to move on, to take his mission to the next village and from there on to Jerusalem, where God has called him. Jesus knew he had a God-given mission, a destiny, and a purpose, and he pursued it single-mindedly and courageously. He didn't get sidetracked into worrying about what others would think of the work God had given him to do or the way he did it. Luke says Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. He knew what he was called to do and he was not going to be distracted from doing it.

If I were to name one fear that I think most stands in the way of our living the abundant life that Jesus wants for us, it would be the fear of rejection. I see folks who are afraid to express any feelings or opinions, or will only do so anonymously, because someone else might disagree with them, mock them or get angry at them. I see folks who continually enable the bad behavior of others, whether it's gossip or alcohol abuse, because they are so afraid that speaking up or saying no will bring rejection. I see folks who are afraid to ask questions of their physician or to insist on a second opinion. I see folks who are desperately unhappy with the way their relationships are going, and yet they are unable to consider any alternatives requiring direct confrontation with others. And I see folks so debilitated by fear of rejection that they have literally given up making much effort, whether it's looking for a job, looking for a spouse, or inviting someone to church.

If you see yourself in any of these descriptions, then know that Jesus died to give you a different kind of life.

If you were reading along in your pew Bibles this morning, then maybe you noticed the footnote at verse 56, which says that some ancient manuscripts have an additional verse in them at that point. Right after Jesus rebuked his disciples for wanting to bring down the wrath of God on those rude Samaritans, some manuscripts have a verse in which Jesus says: "You do not know what Spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings, but to save them."

Most scholars don't believe this verse was in Luke's original. In all likelihood, it was inserted by some later scribe, who thought he could improve on Luke's original by making Jesus' point clearer. If that was his purpose, I think he did a pretty good job of it. They may not be Jesus' original words, but they surely reflect his thinking. To his friends who wanted to flatten his opponents, Jesus explained the heart of the Gospel: I didn't come to destroy people, I came to save them. I didn't come to punish people, I came to be in a loving relationship with them. I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly. If you understand whose Spirit you have, you won't respond with vengeance to the real or imagined slights of others. If you understand whose Spirit you have, fear of rejection isn't going to distract you from doing God's work. As Paul puts it: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7, NIV).

This past week, the fire chief in Eagle, Justin Heim, whose own home was destroyed by the tornados that ripped through town, was asked by reporters how he could keep doing his work of helping and protecting others under these circumstances. He responded, “Well, you can get upset. Or you can get focused.”

When the Samaritans rejected him, Jesus didn't get upset, he got focused. He turned his face towards Jerusalem. That's the path to which he calls us, too. He's given us his holy work of making God's love known to the world, welcoming strangers and bringing outsiders into relationship with a loving God. God has given us God's own Spirit to gift us and empower us for this work. If you doubt your power or your giftedness, then listen to what Cathy Manthei, who preached here last Sunday when I was attending my son's graduation, had to say about you: “Even though you didn't ask”, she said, “I want you to know that I have NEVER been welcomed into a church like I was at Vernon. And did I mention that the music folks were so terrific. I could merely add an Amen after they played and we could all go home...thanks for having such a cool congregation.”

The gifts and the Spirit are here. But Jesus calls us to venture out, to share the Good News with those who aren't already members of the club, in ways that make them want to come closer to a loving and gracious God.

Jesus made it clear that if we're going to do this work, a certain amount of rejection is going to come with the territory. So when it happens, take your cue from him. Sometimes rejection means we need to reconsider our approach. Sometimes it means we have to consider taking a different road that leads us in a different direction. Sometimes it means it's time to shake the dust off our sandals and move on to the next village, as Jesus told his followers a few verses earlier. When rejection happens, there is usually something we can learn from it, if we are open to hearing what the Spirit has to teach us. But we can't afford to get stuck in resentment towards those who don't properly appreciate us and what we have to offer. We can't allow our fears to sidetrack us from the mission to which God calls us, to be salt and light not just to one another but to the whole world.

Jesus made clear that not everyone is ready to follow in his path. It takes courage. It takes a certain singlemindedness of purpose. Most of all, it takes conviction that following him means something more than just going to church, saying we believe, and looking forward to going to heaven when we die. Following him is not just one of several pleasant ways we might choose to spend our time. If we want to follow him, we must make him more than just one priority among many. If we are his followers, then he is the lens through which we view all our other commitments, responsibilities, and priorities.

At the conclusion of this morning's reading Jesus meets up with three would-be followers. One tells him “I'll follow you wherever you go,” and Jesus responds by telling him what that means. It's going to mean going some places that won't necessarily be familiar or comfortable. Christian service and values are not necessarily politically correct, nor are they always, or even often, culturally popular. The second man wants to follow Jesus, but first he wants to bury his father. This sounds like a reasonable request; burying the dead was a sacred obligation. But Jesus says, in effect, if you want to be my follower, you're going to have to devote your energy to renewing and redeeming live people, not burying dead ones. The third man Jesus met that day also had

what sounds like a very reasonable request. He wants to follow Jesus, but wants to say goodbye to family first. Jesus says, if you're going to follow me, you'll have to keep your eyes on the kingdom of God. Everything else is a distraction. Everyone knows that if a farmer looks behind him when he's plowing his field, he's going to plow crooked rows. So if you're going to follow me, now is the time. Not when your kids are older and you have more free time. Not when your work schedule is easier and you have more energy. Not when you retire or when you have nothing more pressing to do. You see, there will always be a reason to say "not now, later"—unless following Jesus is our priority.

Don't take Jesus too literally here. He's not saying our families don't matter or that it's not important to love and honor those closest to us. But he is saying that following him, being a disciple, is a radical commitment. It is a commitment to a way of life that costs something. Sometimes the cost is, we are called outside our comfort zone. We have to say and do and try new things that are not easy for us. We are called to control our desire for retaliation when others reject us. We are called to get past our fear of rejection so we can bring others into the Kingdom. These things will not happen without some effort on our part to open ourselves to God's work in us. The Spirit is at work making us new, but that doesn't mean we don't need to practice those new ways of living and relating. Walking in the Spirit, growing in the spiritual life, is both a gift of God, and a matter of conscious choice on the part of the person involved.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. He was determined to be God's person, no one else. We can do the same.

Because the Spirit that empowered him is the same Spirit that lives in us, always building up and encouraging, transforming and making new.

All to God's glory, honor and praise.

Amen.