

Tracy Daub  
7/4/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Mark 6:1-13

## A WAY FORWARD

Christianity began as a religion of the rejected. That's the truth of our religion. While we all like to pick a winner, whether with our sports teams or our political candidates, while we like to find ourselves on the side of the successful, that is not the history of the early Christian Church. The earliest Christians were rejected and seen by many as "losers." They were not politically successful, economically successful, or socially successful. They did not associate with the powerful or the prestigious but with people who were powerless and vulnerable and of little social importance.

And this rejection began with their leader, with Jesus. Jesus' life story is the story of very little acceptance and a whole lot of rejection. The cross, the very symbol of our faith, is in fact the symbol of that rejection. The cross is where the disgraced were killed and hung up for all to see. And that is, of course, where Jesus finds himself at the end of his life.

In our reading today from Mark's gospel, we are given an earlier example of folks rejecting Jesus. What makes this rejection especially painful for Jesus is that it comes from people in his hometown. Rejection is never easy to experience but it is especially hard when it comes from people you know, from people you care about, from people with whom you have a shared history. Jesus has returned to his hometown with his disciples and he attempts to teach and preach. But his hometown folks are offended by him. Their rejection of Jesus and his ministry is so forceful that even Jesus is astonished by it.

Before we judge those folks in Nazareth too harshly, we might recall that we too are culpable in rejecting Jesus and his way. None of us walks the way of Jesus perfectly. We will not always make Christ-like decisions in the ways we spend our money or exercise compassion. We will not always act Christ-like in how we exclude people or in the ways we reject forgiveness. We will not always behave Christ-like in how we accommodate injustice or in the ways we fail to stand with the oppressed. As individuals we too have and will continue to reject Jesus.

And so has the Christian Church as a whole. The revelations about abusive priests and the hierarchy that protected them, the recent stories of mass graves of indigenous Canadian children found at Christian boarding schools, the Christian churches role in the conquest of lands and the slaughter of peoples throughout history, and other such atrocities, reveal the many, many instances where the Christian Church as a whole has walked away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. These are not small mistakes or slip-ups, but rather they are colossal failures and massive rejections of the way of Jesus Christ.

The Church's rejection of Jesus is not always so violent. Rejection of Jesus is found in churches that proclaim a prosperity gospel—whose message amounts to the idea that believing in Jesus is some kind of personal lottery ticket to wealth and health. Rejection of Jesus is found in churches that domesticate Jesus and his radical message of love and mercy and his call to costly discipleship, and reduce him to some kind of a cuddly toy that comforts us and asks nothing from us. Rejection of Jesus is found *within* the walls of the Christian Church.

We also know that rejection comes from outside the Christian Church. Many of the early followers of Jesus were expelled from their communities and families. Christians in different eras and in different lands have been persecuted for their faith. We Christians in America today

experience rejection of another sort. Many people in today's society reject the Christian message and the Christian Church as irrelevant, uneducated, or—because of Church abuses—even harmful to people's wellbeing. And so they have turned away from the Church. As a result, church buildings are shuttered or converted into condominiums, and have become the casualties of rejection. And we Christians in America find ourselves an ever-shrinking minority.

Rejection of Jesus and his way is nothing new to Christianity. Pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber states that "Rejection has been the traveling companion of the Gospel from the beginning. Don't take it personally." (*Christian Century*, June 29, 2009) But rejection never feels good. And rejection is hard to overcome. And we can grow terribly disheartened in the face of rejection.

I cannot believe that Jesus was immune to the emotions that come with rejection. It had to have been terribly painful and sad and discouraging when his neighbors and relatives rejected him and the message of God he was preaching.

But here is what Jesus does next. He widens the scope of his ministry by summoning together his twelve disciples and sending them out to preach and to heal. And before they set off, Jesus prepares them. After some initial words about what they should pack, Jesus then prepares them for failure. He tells the twelve they should expect rejection. Not everyone will welcome their message. Just as the disciples witnessed the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth, so too will they experience it themselves in their own ministry. Rejection will accompany the preaching and living and proclaiming of the Gospel and, as Nadia Bolz-Weber encourages us, "don't take it personally."

But then Jesus adds something else to his words of preparation. After warning his disciples that people will reject the gospel message, he gives his disciples a ritual for failure.

Jesus instructs them that “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Shaking the dust from one’s feet was a ritual practiced by pious Jews after they left gentile lands and re-entered Jewish territory. It was a symbolic act of shaking off any kind of defilement that might be clinging on.

Jesus offers this ritual to his disciples as means for dealing with failure. Instead of fretting over those who would not accept the gospel message and getting bogged down with discouragement, instead of wasting their time in self-absorption when things didn’t go as planned, they are given a ritual that enables them to let go and move on. Jesus gives them a way forward.

How helpful such a ritual would be for us! When rejection of Jesus and his way comes from within the Church and from outside of the Church, we could benefit from a ritual to help us move on and to help us carry on. We need a symbolic act, even if it is only a mental one we call upon for ourselves alone, we need a symbolic act that will help us move forward so that the rejection of Jesus and his way will not stop us or swamp us or discourage us. Rejection happens, Jesus tells us. Don’t take it personally. Move on. Close that chapter and start a new one.

And we can do that, we can close that chapter and start a new one after experiencing rejection because of something fundamental we believe. We believe that this work of preaching and teaching and living the way of Jesus is not all up to us. We believe that God is present in this world. We believe in the power of God, the power made known at the Resurrection. We believe that God’s “yes” always, always, defeats our “no.”