

“The Ways We Reject God”
Mt. 21:33-46
Sunday, October 8, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Rejection is a painful thing. Most if not all of us want to be accepted by others. We at least want to be included by our friends and our families. Invited, welcomed. Like Norm on that old sitcom, “Cheers.” We want to have a place “where everybody knows your name,” a place where folks cry out in joyful recognition whenever we show up.

But we carry these memories of rejection with us, don’t we? That 3rd grade birthday party we weren’t invited to. The agony of always being the last one chosen for the baseball team or the football team, or never being chosen for the cheerleading squad. The anxiety of the prom – Will someone ask me? or, Will she say “yes?” -- or knowing somehow that you don’t fit in and have no chance of going to the prom. You may have even decided it’s a stupid prom & who wants to go, anyway?

I have this memory from elementary school. I’m feeling like I was in 2nd grade, maybe 3rd. During recess – this was winter in Michigan, so it was cold and icy. There was snow on the ground; snow on everything. Your snow-encrusted mittens would stick to the metal monkey bars or the metal chains on the swings.

There was a little girl my age with beautiful long blond hair. She wore a perfect, beautiful, powder blue snowsuit for recess. Somehow a game called Snow Queen got started, in which all the boys would carry the Snow Queen around the playground, like they were her golden chariot or something.

Well, of course, the girl with the beautiful long blond hair and the perfect, beautiful, powder blue snowsuit would always be chosen to be the Snow Queen. Now that I think about it, she was probably the one to come up with the idea for the game in the first place. I just remember, at the time, as a little 2nd grade girl, standing on that cold, snowy playground in my brown, frumpy, winter jacket and mix-matched snow pants, with short, hacked off, mousey brown hair, face freezing in the cold, head encased in an ugly, stupid knit cap with a god-awful fringe ball sticking up on top, feeling completely alone and ugly and rejected and friendless.

I. Rejection.

We could all tell rejection stories like that. Someone told me how they attended a multi-church Methodist function somewhere and, when they went to find a place to sit, some people at the table huddled like chickens, squawking, “These seats are saved! These seats are saved!” Needless to say, folks are less enthusiastic about participating in an organization when they feel rejected and unwelcomed.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Jesus tells a story to illustrate Israel’s rejection of God. So let’s reflect together on rejection – the ways we feel rejected, and the ways we continue to reject God today.

When we are feeling rejected, or feeling hurt about memories of past rejection, it might help us to remember that Jesus was rejected. Jesus endured the ultimate rejection of death on a cross. He was despised and rejected by everyone – his friends and enemies, alike. A few worthless, no account women remained to the end – rejected, themselves, by the world.

It’s interesting how we get in our minds that being accepted is a sign of being a good church. If our ministry is popular and attracts lots of people and has lots of bells and whistles

and successful programs; if we're bursting at the seams like that unnamed mega church down the street, that's a sign of God's favor.

Now I'm not saying it's bad, whatever that unnamed mega church down the street is doing. I pray for their continued success every time I drive by. In fact, I pray for the continued success of every church in town, every time I pass one. We are the Church universal. Every day we pray for the success of God's church, whatever form it takes, wherever it operates in the world.

But this morning I just want to point out that it's not really biblical for us to expect acceptance and success -- if we use the world's definitions of those words. God's definition of acceptance often results in rejection by the world. If we want to be accepted by God, we need to be ready to risk rejection by the world. If we want success in God's eyes, we need to be ready to risk failure in the eyes of the world. Jesus went to the cross! Jesus, God's own son, was killed. This was the outcome of Jesus' earthly ministry: he was arrested, betrayed and denied by his friends, put on trial, publicly rejected by the crowds who had reveled in his sermons, tortured, and executed as a criminal. Jesus is the definition of failure. Jesus is the definition of rejection... if we use the definitions of this world.

God plays by different rules. God doesn't play the Snow Queen game; God opts out of that game, entirely, and refuses to play. God doesn't lift up physical beauty. God doesn't lift up kings and military generals and people of political or military power. God doesn't place acceptance and success on earthly thrones and seats of power. God doesn't save seats at tables, leaving some folks without a place to sit. Everyone has a place at God's table. God knows everyone's names. God shouts your name in joyful recognition whenever you show up!

II. Ways we reject God.

So what are the ways we reject God?

We have a prime example just this week.

Use our intelligence to amass an obscene amount of wealth.

Use that wealth to gamble and amass a stockpile of weapons.

Use those weapons to maim and slaughter hundreds of people.

Kill ourselves.

This is an extreme, horrific example. But the mass murder in Las Vegas lifts up at least three key factors about rejecting God – points that Jesus makes in his parable:

1. Money and possessions – the desire for these things leads to death.
2. Hurting other people? -- leads to death.
3. Rejecting God – through greed and hurting others – leads to death.

Most of us are mildly tempted by greed because we have a small amount of wealth.

Most of us, when we hurt others, do so with emotional barbs and often unintentionally.

The truth is that all rejection of God leads to death.

Jesus, in his parable, speaks specifically about Israel's rejection of the prophets and, ultimately, the Messiah – Jesus, himself. Such rejection of God and God's chosen messengers leads to death. Jesus is saying -- we saw it most tragically in Las Vegas this week – our choices about God have serious consequences.

III. Acceptance.

Returning to the prom theme for a moment... There's a segue for you!... I think we could all use a lighter topic for a moment, given the never-ending horrors of this week's news cycle.
So...

The prom carries so much symbolism in our culture, doesn't it? Tony Campolo tells the story of the "reject prom." It all began when John Carlson, a Lutheran Minister in Minnesota, believed that senior proms excluded many young adults. It had become an elitist affair for the popular and wealthy. The losers and less fortunate youth stayed away. Carlson planned a party for all those who didn't have a date or couldn't afford to go to the prom. He called it the "Reject Prom." It was such a great time the youth wanted it repeated the following year. Thus the "reject prom" became a local tradition. In time it got press coverage and Timex corporation gave watches to every kid that attended. Other companies joined in and gave gifts as well. In a matter of time the popularity of the "reject prom" exceeded the high school prom, which by comparison was very boring. Rejection was turned into joy.

That's what God does, doesn't he? He does a new thing, and brings joy out of rejection. Jesus was cruelly and brutally rejected. But God used him as the cornerstone for his kingdom, his Church.

God can use us, too. No matter how insignificant we may feel – no matter how rejected, ignored or invisible – God can use your particular uniqueness, my particular uniqueness, to build this corner of the kingdom.

Closing.

Robert Ingersoll, a great agnostic of days gone by, once said to a contemporary, "I will give God five minutes to strike me dead for the things I have said." After five minutes and nothing had happened, Ingersoll's friend remarked, "Did you think you could exhaust God's patience in just five minutes?" (from Jerry L. Schmalenberger, When Christians Quarrel).

God is not in a big hurry. God has love and patience even for the shooter in Las Vegas. God is at work throughout the eons, from the day when he first said, "Let there be light," to that

day in the future when Christ will come again and the trumpets will sound and God's kingdom will be established in fullness, on earth and in heaven.

We reject God when we bow down to the world's definitions and the world's expectations of success. We accept God when we immerse ourselves in biblical truth; when we immerse ourselves in prayerful anticipation of all that God is doing next in this place. What God is doing next in this place is to use us -- flawed, rejected, broken, weak clay pots though we may be. Our success is not our own doing; any victory we have is God's victory.

We give thanks to God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We pray for the Church universal, and the continued expansion of God's compassionate kingdom. May God's vineyard of love overtake all the evils of this world.

Lay all your failures, wounds and rejection at Jesus' feet. Know that you are loved and accepted by God.

Amen.