

Let Go of Fear of Rejection

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, 31 January 2016: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

You may have heard that a few weeks ago the Primates of the Anglican Communion met in England. The Primates are the leaders of the various worldwide churches that make up the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is not a franchise system, with a headquarters in England and branches all over the world that do what headquarters says. It's more of a network of relationships among churches with historic ties to the Church of England. We're all independent, but we try to work together.

Those relationships have been strained over the years for many reasons, but the relationship has become more strained recently. The Episcopal Church, our church, made the thoughtful, prayerful decision to respect the dignity of every human being. We welcome, baptize, ordain, and marry everybody. Some churches in the Anglican Communion have been troubled by these actions. For the most part, they're not trying to be hateful. We're just in different places. So the Primates, at this meeting decided to require that for the next three years The Episcopal Church could no longer represent the Anglican Communion on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, or be appointed to internal committees, or vote on issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.

In reality, the Primates don't have the authority to enforce this. Another group will have to decide whether to accept their recommendation. Whether they do or not, this requirement only affects three entities, which have five total representatives from The Episcopal Church. So not much has changed. The Episcopal Church has not been kicked out of the Anglican Communion, as some reported it. Episcopal Church leaders have said we will continue to welcome, baptize, ordain, and marry everyone. We hope we can find ways to continue to walk together.

But in some ways, what happened to The Episcopal Church a few weeks ago was somewhat like what happened to Jesus in Nazareth.

You recall last week that Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He used words from Isaiah to define his purpose in the world. He claimed the witness of the prophets and declared "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to set at liberty the oppressed." He identified himself with the prophetic, world-changing movement of God in the world.

Today we read what happened next. His neighbors drove him out of town to the brow of a hill so that they might hurl him off the cliff. In short, Jesus, and his message of justice and jubilee, were rejected by those who knew him best.

This wasn't the last time Jesus experienced rejection, of course. His witness to God's way of peace eventually led him to the cross, where he was rejected by sinners and handed over to death.

There are different kinds of rejection. Let's be honest – sometimes we deserve it. Behaving like a jerk may lead others to want to stay away. That's not rejection for right. And sometimes, it really is them and not us. Some people are so bound by their own immaturity and internal struggle that they cannot reach beyond themselves or consider another's point of view. What may look like a rejection of us is in reality another's fear or pain or mental block. We need to have compassion on those folks, but that's not rejection for right either. Some people may have a victim complex and may claim we are rejecting them if we disagree with them. That too is not rejection for right.

Rejection for right is the inevitable result of choosing the ways of God over the ways of this world. That's what happened to Jesus at Nazareth. He announced his intention to stand with God's dream of good news and freedom and peace. His neighbors found him threatening and took him to a cliff. But he remained calm, passed through the midst of them, and went on his way.

Note that he did not get defensive. He did not circle back to the main points from Isaiah and insist that he was right and they were wrong. He did not fight back. He simply passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Following news of the Primates' decision, most leaders in the Episcopal Church said we were experiencing rejection for something we've come to believe is right. Our own Bishop responded this way on Facebook –

First, it rarely surprises me when loving like Jesus brings real world consequences. Second, I support our Presiding Bishop wholeheartedly. So, we persist in affirming the dignity of all people and we press on with Jesus.

So the experience of our church over the past few weeks has been an example to us all of how to deal with rejection for right. If we are following Jesus, if we are sharing in the good news of God, if we love without limits, we will be rejected by some people. It's gonna happen. It may come from friends who don't agree. It may come from family members who think we are heretics. We may fear it when a friend or neighbor starts bubbling up with what sounds like hateful speech and we don't know how to respond.

And in those moments, our scriptures today commend for us the example of Jesus, who calmly passed through the midst of them, and went on his way. Like students at the lunch counter sit ins, sometimes not responding in the face of rejection for right says so much more than words.

And today our scriptures also commend these famous words from I Corinthians about love.

Love is the goal. Love is the foundation and outcome of the way of Jesus. Love is the litmus test for whether we are being rejected for right or for some other reason. If we are rejected because of how we love others, and if we keep loving everyone fully and completely, even those who reject us, we have gained the more excellent way.

And love looks like Jesus. Even in the face of rejection, love is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way but still rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In this season after Epiphany, we've been thinking about things to let go in the New Year. Too many of us are bound by fear of rejection. We worry about what others will think or say. We become blown about by the ever shifting winds of popular opinion. We may question our own convictions because we become more ruled by others than by the love that is at the heart of all things. We need to let it go. When we are grounded in love, we are stronger than any force or person who rejects us. We need to let go of fear of rejection and embrace love for all.

Dr. Martin Luther King figured that out early in his ministry. A year after the Montgomery bus boycott he preached one of his greatest sermons – On Loving Your Enemies. He and his congregation had faced real rejection. Much more would lie ahead. But in this sermon he talked about the redemptive power of love. He said Jesus' command to love our enemies "is not the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer. This command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies." Even for those who reject us. He closed that sermon by saying, "So this morning, as I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama and all over America and over the world, I say to you, "I love you. I would rather die than hate you." That's love. And we know what that kind of love did.

Following the Primates' Meeting, our own Primate, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, posted a video. He said this was not the outcome he and others wanted, so we were disappointed. But then he said, "The truth is, it may be part of our vocation to help the Communion and to help many others to grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us. . . . And so we must claim that high calling; claim the high calling of love and faith; love even for those with whom we disagree. We are part of the Jesus Movement and the cause of God's love in this world can never stop and will never be defeated." He is so right.

And so I have to say how proud I am of all of you. We gathered today for our Annual Meeting. We did many great things in 2015, and we celebrated those this morning. We also did some hard things, things that not a lot of other churches in town are doing yet. We had some serious conversations about racism. We blessed the marriages of some of our same sex couples. We deepened our friendship with the Boxwood neighborhood. We are trying to get to know our Muslim neighbors. This is hard work. Some folks may not be comfortable with all of this but we're committed to learning together. We are committed to loving each other. We are seeking to

love like Jesus. Some may reject us for that. But at every turn in 2015, our leaders made the decision to let go of fear of rejection and embrace love.

May God help us grow in love. Love will save our world. Amen.

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