

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2015
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“Authority”

Today’s Gospel gives us two stories to consider: Jesus being rejected in his home town, Nazareth; and the call and commissioning of the twelve disciples. The stories show us the contrast between those who do not accept Jesus and those who do. We know this contrast in our lives, both as we seek to be faithful disciples and as we live in a world that is often indifferent, if not hostile, to Jesus.

The Gospels show us that the questioning, the rejection, the animosity directed at Jesus began very early, at the start of his ministry. And, of course, it ended with his crucifixion. Luke tells this story of rejection at the very beginning, right after Jesus returns from his temptation in the wilderness. Luke also tells us that those who heard Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth were “*filled with wrath.*” They drove him out of town and wanted to execute him. (4:29)

Matthew and Mark record his rejection after a series of narratives that show Jesus’ power to heal, and even to bring peace and calm to the life-threatening storm on the Sea of Galilee. Mark, especially, wants us to know that many people, even those in Jesus’ home town, reject not just his teaching, but also his healings, his miracles.

The twelve that Jesus calls and sends out are warned that they, too, will be rejected, but they must press on and not give up or be disappointed. “*If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you ... shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.*” (Matthew 10:14) If they have rejected Jesus, the rabbi, they will reject his disciples.

I wonder how we have experienced rejection or opposition to the practice of our faith? Mostly, I think people respond to those who are active in Church, and actively working on their spiritual lives, with indifference. Rarely have I experienced hostility or outright rejection. Although some grow impatient with my leadership, and some become disappointed or angry about some part of our life and ministry at Grace Church, so they stop going to church or look for another parish to join.

In 1976 many rejected the Episcopal Church because we started to ordain women to the Priesthood. Some left because we agreed to start using a new *Book of Common Prayer*. In 2003 some left because a gay man was consecrated a Bishop. The rejection continues as we affirm same-sex blessings and now marriage. Episcopalians have known and experienced rejection.

Sometimes people may have good reasons to move to another parish. There aren’t any good reasons to give up on one’s spiritual life or stop going to church altogether, as many do. We should not be surprised by rejection, opposition or indifference.

What is this teaching that Jesus shared that was so difficult for people to accept? What is the authority that Jesus has given to his disciples, to his Church, that is rejected, denied?

I think we can say, first and foremost, that Jesus taught this: God is love, and God's love brings healing to our world. Love is difficult to truly accept, especially when love does not seem more powerful than death, or than illness, or than evil.

Where is the authority and power of God's love when a person is welcomed into a church prayer group and ends up shooting and killing innocent people? Where is the reality of God's love when a child dies, or a young adult is killed by cancer?

Jesus shows us that God's love always triumphs; God's love is stronger than death, illness, evil. We see his love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We see his love in the lives of men and women who know Jesus Christ and try to follow his teachings. The disciples, the Church, carry God's love to the world.

God's love helped to inspire the founders of this nation. God's love has brought us here today. God's love enables our missionaries to go to New Jersey and our J2A pilgrims to go to Germany. These groups carry the authority of Jesus, the authority of the Church, as they venture forth to witness to God's love.

Each one of us has to discover God's place in our lives. Each one of us has to find God's special, individual call. Each one of us is sent to share the good news of Christ. Each one of us can witness with authority to the power of God's love.

This coming Tuesday we will celebrate the requiem for a man who recently showed me the power and authority of God's love in his life and death. Bart's daughter, who was married here at Grace, told me a couple of weeks ago that her dad had come back to this area to receive treatment for brain cancer that had suddenly spread, threatening his life. He was in Sibley Hospital and wanted to know if the family could have his funeral at Grace.

I said, "Of course" and went to take him communion at Sibley. Bart was accepting of this terminal cancer. He trusted in God's love and he shared his trust with his family. I went back to see him and give him communion again before I was planning to be away for a week. We both knew this would probably be our last visit.

Bart was moved to Northern Virginia Hospice and died the day I was returning from Georgia. He knew God's love and this love filled him with hope; hope, even though he would never see his two baby grandchildren walk; hope, even as he knew he had such a short time to live and be physically present with his wife, daughters and family; hope, even though he was only 59 years old!

St. Paul probably did not have cancer, but he did have some "*weakness*," some "*thorn*" in the flesh, some handicap he had to live with. Paul was rejected, misunderstood, persecuted, tortured, ridiculed and finally executed because of his faith in the power of God's love in Jesus Christ. He heard Jesus say to him, "*My grace is sufficient for you...*" When we face the huge challenges of life, may we remember these words. God's grace is the only authority we need.

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13