

The Growth of Faith

It's not surprising to hear St. Mark tell us in the Gospel reading for today that Jesus was rejected by his home town when he came to preach at Nazareth. They took "offense" at him. Jesus was amazed at their "unbelief". Mark tells us about this rejection at the start of his 6th chapter, after Jesus has already called his disciples, healed many, and saved his disciples from drowning by stilling the storm in the sea of Galilee.

Those in his home town of Nazareth had obviously heard of these healings and miraculous events in other parts of the region. St. Luke writes about this rejection much earlier in his account. In fact, Luke gives us more details in his story. He writes that all who heard Jesus in the synagogue were filled with wrath and want to stone him to death (Luke 4:28-29).

Each one of us can understand rejection. Jesus was fully human. We see in this story how being rejected in his hometown was but a prelude to the kind of rejection by the religious and political authorities that would lead them to crucify Jesus. This rejection is given its final power when the crowd shouts, "Crucify him!" when Pilate wants to release him as we commemorate on Good Friday.

We realize quite early that having faith, trying to be loving people, might cause us to be rejected. One of the hardest things parents have to witness is seeing their children rejected. To embrace the Christian faith is to understand rejection.

But Mark does something in his narrative that Luke doesn't. Mark contrasts the rejection in Nazareth with the call and sending of his disciples, two by two. Mark tells us that faithfulness of the disciples leads them to accomplish healings and repentance through their preaching. They carry on Jesus' ministry and see the same signs of glory. The rejection at Nazareth does not compare with the faith and works of the disciples on mission for Jesus.

I'm sure this was Mark's experience of the church during those decades after Jesus' resurrection. Many did not believe. Many rejected the good news of love. But many came to believe. Many lived in the changed reality of love. The Gospel spread. The Church grew, rapidly – even in the face of persecution, even in the capital of the Empire, in Rome.

So, this is our hope, this is what we see in the course of human history and throughout our lives. We need not despair because of unbelief and/or rejection. We have work to do – the same work as Jesus: to preach good news, to help people understand and receive God's love, to heal, to fight evil. There will always be rejection and unbelief, but there will be many who hear the good news of love and want to live in God's love.

Today we celebrate three baptisms. Some of our baptismal candidates, the older children, have told their parents "I want to be baptized." Today our teenagers and adult sponsors leave for a week to help rebuild homes in West Virginia destroyed by floods. They want to share God's love.

Rejection and unbelief do not have the last word. The good news of God's love is the last word. Hope is stronger than unbelief and rejection. Our faith grows as we share this good news.

Mark's story about the disciples reminds us to travel light on our spiritual journey. We are not to get weighted down by material or emotional baggage. And Mark also tells us not to waste our time and energy on those who are not interested in hearing about God's love.

Witnessing the growth of faith is exciting and hopeful. It can begin with our children. It can change our teenagers. It can give our adults hope and purpose. And when we get to the end of our physical lives, we can know that there is more after this life.

Our work is to help grow faith in every life we encounter. Remember Jesus was challenged by rejection and unbelief. Remember his response was to ask others to help him with his work. Let's always ask others to help us in the most important work we can do, to help grow faith.