

## BEYOND REJECTION

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on January 31, 2010,  
the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, based on I Corinthians 13 and St. Luke 4:21-30.*

*No one* likes rejection. *No one* likes being pushed aside, not accepted for who and what you are. However much we dread rejection, I suppose every person sitting here this morning has her or his own stories to tell.

There's rejection if the job we've applied for goes to someone else. That's *soft* rejection. It's not that we are lacking in gifts and strengths, it's just that someone *else's* gifts and strengths are greater or more suitable, to the position.

What *really* hurts is when we have invested ourselves in a relationship or in a community; when we have offered what is deepest and truest in us and we see it turned away, dismissed, even scorned. That's *hard* rejection. That's the kind of rejection that takes a long time to move beyond, because it strikes at the very core of who we are.

In a way, Jesus' rejection by the Nazareth community is understandable. We can almost hear the people thinking, "Who does he think *he* is?" The story is clearer in Mark's version. He has the locals saying, "Where did this man get these things?... What's this wisdom that has been given to him, that he even does miracles? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him."

Luke's readers may already have known Mark's version, so they knew that the question "Is not this Joseph's son?" was really an accusation.

Luke's Jesus is pretty confrontational. Luke has Jesus countering their doubts by referencing *other* prophets who were rejected and turned to people outside Israel. This absolutely enrages them, and Jesus' former friends and neighbors are ready to hurl him over a cliff. But somehow, mysteriously, Jesus evades them. As another translation puts it, "he was going on." This different translation suggests something important. Jesus was "going on" to a message that would move beyond Israel into the whole world.

Getting back to us... what do *we* do when faced with rejection? One response is to *deny* its importance. "What a stupid job! I didn't want it anyway!" Or, "I never really liked him that much..." This may seem like a good defensive maneuver, but it has its down side. If we have really invested ourselves in the possibility of a new job; or if we have invested ourselves in what we hoped will be a lifelong relationship; when we dismiss the importance of that job or that relationship, we're really dismissing *ourselves*. We're trying to tell ourselves something that contradicts our experience. Because, truth to tell, "I really *did* want that new job." "I really *do* love that person, and I wanted us to be in relationship the rest of my life."

Another possible response to rejection is a desire for *revenge*. There's a lot of vengeance in our Scriptures, and there is a lot of vengeance in our world. This is based on the misguided idea that "an eye for an eye" really works. It doesn't. Having the murderer of your sister or mother or wife executed does not bring her back. You might have some pale satisfaction in the perpetrator not being jailed for life at tax-payers expense, but otherwise nothing has changed. Your sister or mother or wife or husband or child still is gone and you are still grieving.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu once observed, "if we insist on 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' the whole world will end up toothless and blind."

Archbishop Tutu also said, in my hearing, at a graduation ceremony at Virginia Seminary: "My enemy is not God's enemy. My enemy is God's *child*."

These powerful words move us, in an instant, light-years away from our desire either to minimize rejection or to seek vengeance for it. All of a sudden, our landscape of rejection shifts into a deeper, eternal dimension. A dimension that is purely of God.

When Jesus said, as his last words on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” he wasn’t trying to win points for goodness. Jesus was in agony. Even then, he didn’t fully understand what was happening to him. But there he was, rejected by his own people, suffering excruciating physical and emotional pain.

But even on the cross, Jesus would not minimize his caring for his people *or* lash out in anger. He stayed in the spiritual place where he lived the whole of his life: the place of self-less love, love beyond ego, caring-for-others *love*. In Greek, the language of our Gospels, the word for that love is *agape*.

Unlike English, which is impoverished by having only *one* word for love, Greek has four. *Agape* love is God’s love for us. This is the love Paul describes in the transcendent passage from his first letter to the Christians at Corinth. God doesn’t need for us to perform a kind of quid pro quo; “I’ll give you this if you’ll give me that.” God doesn’t actually *need* anything at all. What God *longs for* from us is relationship, but that has to be freely given. It cannot be coaxed or coerced.

Somehow, even on the cross, Jesus knew this. He also knew that this amazing, self-giving love of God cannot be confined or constrained by petty boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus knew that God’s love flows out to *everyone*; *all* who accept will receive God’s loving care and support. *No exceptions; all are loved!*

Life is full of disappointments. I can guarantee that every one of us, sooner or later, will have to face a moment of bitter rejection. Maybe *several* moments. It’s then we have a choice. We can minimize our loss, or we can be angry, even vengeful about it; but if we do, we may not like ourselves very much. Then it becomes a double loss.

Or we can choose that other, mysterious way of *agape* love. A way of caring for something or someone which means far more than earning goodness points or gratitude. This is how we join God in binding people together, even in the most challenging circumstances.

In today’s Gospel story, as Jesus escapes Nazareth, the people seem to remain the way they had always been. They were sure they had successfully discredited this angry young prophet who was telling them things they didn’t want to hear. But that didn’t change *reality*.

They *needed* to hear that the poorest of the poor have worth. They *needed* to hear that they were responsible to make justice happen. They *needed* to hear that they were God’s beloved. And so do *we*.

So what do we do when we, or what we have to offer, is rejected? We can get angry. We can pretend to be indifferent. Or we can allow *agape* love, self-disinterested love, to transform our hearts and the world.