

FROM REJECTION TO RENEWAL

A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on July 4, 2010, the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, based on Saint Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

I'm going to ask a purely rhetorical question: Have you ever been rejected? Everybody has and it's never pleasant. Rejection has many faces. We may be fired unexpectedly from a job because someone thought we couldn't handle our responsibilities. We may disagree, but once the boss turns against you, that's *it*.

Harder still is to be effectively "fired" from a relationship. A friend, a partner, a spouse turns your world upside-down when they unilaterally decide that we are expendable. "It's time to move on," they inform us. When that's the last thing on earth we feel.

The shock that comes from rejections like these feels like being in a car accident. At first we're numb, disoriented. When we become aware again we're feeling pain; emotional, physical, even spiritual *pain*. We can't even imagine life feeling "normal" ever again.

Rejection is hard when a gift we have to offer is refused. Have you ever tried to help a friend you perceived was in trouble? They may accept, with gratitude, and use your gift to turn their lives around. More likely, they'll look at you like you're crazy and begin to avoid being around you.

It's even harder to share our faith, *especially* for us Episcopalians. We don't want to seem pushy, we don't want to intrude. So we miss opportunities to share how deeply we have been sustained by our faith.

We also don't want to mimic the behavior of more radical evangelicals who witness to their faith through threats: "Come to church or you're going to hell!" We may ourselves have come from faith traditions that use guilt as a religious motivator. We know that guilt imposed on others is wrong, empty and simply doesn't work. Responsibility for past actions and a desire for change has to come from *within*. When we push others toward our own religious point-of-view we do them and ourselves a disservice.

Jesus knew this and he taught his disciples to move beyond their desire for retribution. Remember last week's Gospel reading? The Samaritans had not welcomed Jesus' disciples, so they wanted to "rain down fire" upon them. Jesus rebuked them.

In today's reading the disciples congratulate themselves that "even the demons submit to us!" How spiritually naïve they are. Jesus tries to bring them down to earth and prepare them for the rejections to come. He offers some *extremely practical* advice about spreading the Gospel – and living *all* of life, for that matter:

Insight #1: Don't go it alone. Jesus sends the extended group of disciples out by 2's. Jesus knows evangelists need company, someone with whom to share disappointments as well as joys. All of us need trusted companions on our spiritual journey. In this way we realize Paul's vision in the letter to the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Insight #2: Travel light. Most of us *need* far fewer possessions than we *have*. I know *I* do! Jesus teaches his disciples to rely on the wisdom they already carry with them, rather than external accouterments. When we're bound up with our possessions they come to possess *us*. Many of us wait to realize this when we're downsizing and have to deal with all the stuff we have accumulated!

Insight #3: Speak from your own experience. You don't have to be eloquent and you don't have to be outwardly "successful." Remember what Mother Teresa famously said, "God doesn't call me to be successful. God calls me to be faithful." Our call is to speak from the heart about how God sustains and upholds us. "Preach the Gospel always; occasionally use words."

And if you are rejected in your attempt to reach out in love and concern, just keep going. "Whatever house you enter," Jesus says, "first say 'Peace to this house!' and if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest upon that person; but if not, it will return to you." Then shake the dust from your shoes and move on.

Often we fall into the trap of thinking that our "peace" – our sense of contentment and tranquility – depends on the response of others. It doesn't. Like other aspects of God's grace, our peace comes from within.

What matters most is how we treat ourselves and one another, showing in everything we say and everything we do that God's kingdom, the realm of Love, is not only coming, but is already *here*.

Today being the Fourth of July, I wish you a happy and safe holiday; even in what will probably be sweltering heat. I hope we can all celebrate the beginning of our country, especially the men and women whose vision has shaped our history.

I hope we will also remember that we are part of a global community, and that what we do or fail to do as a nation has an impact on what one eucharistic liturgy calls "this fragile earth, our island home." Happy Independence Day!