

“Rejected”
Luke 4:21-30, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
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Affirmation comforts us

That home town boy Jesus has grown up and is back in town. Listening to him will be comfortable. Sort of like smelling and eating comfort food. Like Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken! Not spicy food! Not chimichunga with Tobasco sauce! Not bland like jello. Comfort food. Like warm mashed potatoes and pepper gravy! Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one we’ve known since he was a youngster?” Can you see Jesus’ home town friends beaming with pride? Can you see their broad smiles and the sparkle in their eyes? Jesus has made a fine rabbi.

My 22 year old son Shane and Ray our pianist purchased season tickets together to the Predator games. The other night, Shane says he and Ray went to fight and a hockey game broke out! When the Titans or the Predators are winning, they affirm us. We take pride in our home town teams. When they are winning they affirm us, we have nothing but nice things to say about them. We are proud of them and ourselves. But when they are losing, our hometown teams do not affirm us. And when they do not affirm us, we reject them. We assassinate the character of the coach and the players. When they affirm us, we affirm them. When they do not affirm us, we do not affirm them.

We are comfortable with those things that affirm us either individually or collectively. All of us bask in praise like a turtle which crawls out of the water onto a rock, warming itself in the sun. We live vicariously when one of our own does well. There is nothing wrong with this. This is a good thing. After all, it has been said that sermon is a good sermon in which people leave church loving God, loving themselves, and loving the church.

Affirmation comforts our souls like fried chicken and mashed potatoes comfort our stomachs. But persistent affirmation does not allow space for transformation. Transformation sometimes requires the bitter medicine of confrontation. Sometimes transformation requires not just love, but truth.

Looking at the backside distresses us

The Word of Jesus, the Word of God, is not always pleasant to hear. Some one says, “One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea.” The citizens of Nazareth believe they are the favored people. But Jesus has something to say about that. Israel is full of widows in Elijah’s day, but Elijah goes to the house of a widow in Sidon. Also, Israel has many lepers in Elisha’s time, but Elisha heals a man from Syria. His hometown folk graciously receive Jesus, until he challenges their racial prejudice. He dares to declare the children of Israel are not special favorites of God. Indeed, God singles out individuals in Sidon and Syria for blessings. And that really sets the heather on fire! Someone has said, “People defend nothing more violently than the pretenses they live by.” What the people hear is not what they want to hear from “their” Messiah.

Jesus reminds his hometown friends that Elijah does not show favor to the members of the synagogue, but instead gives strangers food, like the widow in Sidon. He

reminds his friends that Elisha does not show favor to the members of the synagogue, but instead heals Naaman the Syrian from his leprosy. Jesus says the one and only God is not a tribal God. The God of the Jews is also the God of the Gentiles. The God of the widow of Sidon and the God of Naaman the Syrian. Can you see the puzzled looks on the faces of Jesus' friends? On the faces of Jesus' homeys?

I heard a joke the other day. A man dies and goes to heaven, and Peter shows him around heaven. He takes the man inside several churches. He takes them into an Episcopalian church, a Methodist church, a Baptist church, and a community church. Finally, he gets to the Presbyterian church, but they do not go inside. Peter says to the man, "Sshhsh, you need to be quiet, and you cannot go in here. Because the Presbyterians think they are the only ones up here!"

The one and only God is not a tribal God, but is also the God of the strangers down the street, the God of the strangers in Nolensville, the God of the poor folk Frank treats on Friday mornings, and the God of the homeless we feed in the soup kitchen once a month. God does not favor us anymore than them. God does not discriminate. The truth is, to God, "they" are us and "we" are them.

But this is unsettling to Jesus' friends and to us. We understand them when Jesus' friends react to his attempt to teach them a new idea. And when they hear Jesus, all in the synagogue are filled with rage. Jesus' words set everyone seething with anger.

Sometimes we reject Jesus

They got up, drove him out of Nazareth, and led him to the brow of the hill so they might hurl him off the cliff. Can you see the anger on their faces? Can you see their clenched fists waving in the air? Now can you also see the peace on the face of Jesus?

Upsetting as they are, Jesus knew he had spoken only truth. Jesus recognizes that no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown.

We are suspicious of people who challenge our cherished myths and kick us out of our comfort zones. We have spoken during this Epiphany season about seeing the face of Jesus. Three weeks ago we learned from the Gospel that we see the face Jesus in the face of the homeless, sick, and oppressed. And that very week, as a congregation, we did just that. We went to the soup kitchen at Belmont church at noon and fed the homeless. The next week we learned from the Gospel that we see the face of Jesus in the stranger. And that very week we called and sent notes to all our visitors. This week we learn that we see Jesus in the face of those who make us mad. Those we want to reject. Those we want to shun. Those we think first rejected us because they have the courage to tell us the truth. The Russian short story writer Anton Chekhov once penned, "The falsehood which exalts we cherish more than the meaner truths that are a thousand strong." The falsehoods which exalt are those fair weather friends who give us affirmation when instead we need truth. The meaner truths are those friends and spouses who give us honest feedback, feedback which we need, but which we reject. Those people we wish to hurl off a cliff because they hurt our precious egos. Because they hold up a mirror we do not wish to look into.

But perhaps those who tell us the truth love us more than those who only give us affirmation. Affirmation when what we really need is truth. The trick is being receptive to truth. When we reject the meaner truths that are a thousand strong, I propose who we are

really rejecting is Jesus. For Jesus is the author not just of love, but also of truth.

Sometimes painful truth.

A friend once told me that constructive criticism is an oxymoron. Criticism is always difficult to accept, but if we are open to it, it can be helpful. A recent article in Reader's Digest stated that when we are criticized we ought to ask ourselves whether the criticism contains any truth. If it does, we should learn from it, even if it is not given in the right spirit. Even if the person who gives it has written us off.

When we are not defensive we become aware that constructive criticism is a real compliment to us. The person offering it runs the risk of arousing our anger, but many times cares enough for us to take this chance.

Luke writes, "They drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Our indignation leads to missed opportunities

Jesus gives them the slip and goes on his way. We have no indication that Jesus ever returned to Nazareth. From then on Capernaum is regarded as the closest thing he has to a hometown. Jesus doesn't have to sneak out, he yells; "Here I am, come and get me!" all the way out. They still do not notice. They are too busy with their personal issues. The indignant will never glimpse God. How sad. Jesus is right there and he walks away. With a ho-hum and an uncovered yawn, Jesus slips right out the back, Jack. Right out of their lives.

We wonder how this happened, as if Jesus' movement through the crowd was a miracle. But this happens every week in churches right here in Brentwood. The words of Jesus are there, the potential for spiritual growth is there, even the resources are there; but Jesus slips out the back door. Whenever we ignore the critics.

When people reject Jesus, they miss the opportunity of a lifetime. Jesus weeps for our love, and we turn away. Jesus slips out the back door because we become too self-focused. Too money-focused. Too focused on preserving the status quo. Or too focused on being entertained. Jesus is right there but he slips out when he sees that along with the religious folk of Nazareth, we might spend the rest of our lives debating who he really is and what he really means. We might have given all our troubles to Jesus, but we let him slip out the back. Is all lost when Jesus slips out the back? The song writer says, "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed. For I am your God, and will still give you aid. I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

Conclusion

Fried chicken, chimichunga, and jello. Missed opportunities slipping out the back. Luke tells us not to look for a Jesus who sounds like one of us. Instead, Luke tells us to listen for the voice of Jesus in our harshest critic. But if you are the one delivering the word of constructive criticism, listen to what Paul has to say to the church at Corinth. If you speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, you are a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. So when you speak your truth, speak your truth in love. Sandwich it between two genuine compliments. And don't say it at all unless your truth will build someone up. **Glory be to God. Hallelujah and Amen.**