

Completely-In Disciples

We can't escape it. Today's gospel lesson from Matthew reminds us that rejection is one of the deepest and most frequent emotional wounds we experience in life and we should be prepared for it if we are to be true and complete disciples of Jesus Christ. Not that long ago our risk of rejection was limited to fairly small group of people—our family, school, friendship or work circles.

Today it is an entirely different beast due to the internet, social media platforms and dating apps. Each and every day we are being connected to an ever-widening network of people, literally thousands of people, any of whom might chose to ignore our posts, chats, texts, or dating profiles, or even hurl a flaming insult toward us when we not looking—all done with a simple click.

Of course, not all rejections are of equal magnitude—just like earthquakes are not of equal intensity. While no one likes to have their ideas shot down or dismissed in a meeting at work, few things cause as many emotional tremors a partner telling us they want to break up or our family ostracizing us for a life style choice we have made or a religious path we have chosen.

Some you may be a little remain skeptical about how much our fear of rejection runs our lives and keeps us either flying underneath the radar or so well-defended that even the most experienced burglar couldn't drill into our safe. Medical researchers have recently discovered that the part of the brain that is stimulated by the emotional pain of rejection is the same part of the brain that is activated by physical pain such as breaking one's arm. Pain is pain no matter what form it takes.

So, yes, rejection—our experience of it, our fear of it, and how we cope with it—is one of the principal factors that influence our ability to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and offer the bold witness God requires of us. In today's gospel lesson is a set of instructions given to Jesus' original disciples as they prepare to enter a dangerous often hostile mission field to share the Good News. And what is the Good News: to cure the sick, cast out demons, feed the poor, release the captives, and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Matthew's gospel was written in such a way as to address the fear of rejection, and in many cases, severe persecution that those early Christians felt as they risked separating from their religions of origin and their families of origin in order to embrace the new teachings and new life promised through Jesus Christ. In that day and age, to be cut off from one's family was often a certain death sentence as so much of one's economic survival in an agricultural society depended on being part of a larger group.

In fact some evolutionary psychologists believe that we human beings are hard-wired to respond to the fear of rejection by conforming to family or tribe norms so we won't run the risk of being voted off the island. So it should be so of no surprise that we often prefer to soften, dilute, or explain away the radical teachings of Jesus which have the power to change the very paradigm from which we operate. Too often we become just partly-in disciples.

While it is true that many of us have not yet had to make the hard sacrifices that Christians in other countries have made due to overt persecution and discrimination, Jesus' teachings are still relevant to us as we are called to examine why we are hesitant to overcome what others might think if we:

Openly share and express our faith in the market or work place,

Or boycott recreational activities that conflict with Sunday morning worship,

Or refuse to vacation at a hotel who practices unfair labor practices,

Or encourage ourselves and our children to choose careers that more directly serve those in our society who have the greatest needs,

Or to make financial decisions that allow us to simplify our lives so more resources such as time, money, and energy can be freed up to support the mission of Christ and the church.

On our own, we are not able to overcome our survival hard-wiring and grow in boldness of faith unless we have God's help in abundant supply. Who in their right mind would take emotional, relational, financial, or career risks unless they knew that God and his Church would be there to help them?

We are called to trust in God's providential care—especially during times we feel the most vulnerable to being rejected or hindered by others who we thought we could count on and loved us. Some of you have been blessed with supportive friends and family who have nurtured your faith and your spiritual callings. Others like myself had to turn, early on, to the Body of Christ, the family of God, to receive a spiritual family to care for us and nurture our spiritual callings in life in order to not have them crushed by our culture's values of materialism, competitiveness, and fixation on wealth.

Over these last weeks since Trinity Sunday we have been looking at who God is and we have come to understand God as to be profoundly relational and not some far-off Zeus-like type of God ready to zap us when we don't measure up and remains unwilling to help us. If you are still hanging on to God as a thundering Zeus or an angry police officer then Jesus' saying, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" will sound very scary and push any "rejection and I'm afraid to take risks button" that you might have. It will send you right back into the old way of being—unable to live the bold life of faith that Jesus calls us to.

But if you are beginning to see God as the one who saves, the one who delivers, the one who is relentlessly in His pursuit of a loving relationship with you, a fitful insomniac who stays up nights plotting a way to bring you back to him, then you will likely hear "I have not come to bring peace but a sword" as the promise of a good physician who will convert the sword into a scalpel and use great skill in cutting away anything that is keeping you from completely trusting and coming alive in Christ.

Today's gospel lesson in its entirety creates a sharp knife that cuts through all of our worldly attachments—even family—if they interfere with our primary love which is for Jesus. I invite all of us to wrestle with these sharp-edged words of Jesus until we come out with a more elegant and beautiful understanding of Jesus' full and complete claim on our lives. We may be sons and daughters, wives and husbands, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers but none of these identities should completely define or contain us. Our deepest identity is defined by our identity as a child that is in relationship with God and this is the over-arching identity from which all other identities grow. By claiming this truest identity, which can only be given to us by our Creator, we find the strength to search for the family of God in whatever forms that takes.

Our fear of rejection, of being judged, misunderstood, persecuted or even assaulted because of our standing up and out for what we believe may disable us at times but Jesus comes as the one who reassures us that his ever-present love is with us. It is critical to the mission of St. Thomas that we continue to become a safe community for all in need and especially for those in need of family or a place to call their own. In just a week we will be welcoming Congregations for the Homeless back to St. Thomas. This is very good.

In my tenure here, we have welcomed immigrants from Iran and Africa who have escaped persecution and hardship. I know we will do more! If we continue to believe in a relational God, we can expect to see our beloved family at St. Thomas expand, diversify and grow. This relational God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier—is an ever-expansive Trinity and a gracious unity watching over the entirety of creation—including the smallest of sparrows.

God has the whole world in his hands but our Christians around the world have no way of trusting in that unless we reach out to them and all human beings that are threatened. God continues to call us to step up and out in faith, overcoming fears of rejection and persecution and help others do the same, to do what often seems like the impossible: to boldly proclaim in word and deed the Good News of God's kingdom. Please join me in becoming one of God's "completely in" disciples. Amen.