

“Rejected For You”

*“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matthew 21:42).*

Rejection is one of the most painful realities in life. Some of us have faced rejection in our professional lives, and others have felt it in relationships with friends or family members, but no matter how it enters your story, the sting of rejection sends the unmistakable message that you are unwanted. At its root, the word “rejection” means “to throw back” or “to throw out,” like something you would do with sewage or trash, and, in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells a story of violent rejection.

This account from Matthew took place during the final week of Jesus’ life. The Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem had occurred. Jesus had already overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. In the previous chapter, he had disgraced the Jewish leaders, promising that the “tax collectors and prostitutes” would enter the Kingdom before they would. So now, as Passover drew near, the Jewish leaders were watching His every move, and in this charged atmosphere, Jesus began a parable: “There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country” (21:33).

Now, when we hear this parable, it seems like a stand-alone story, but when the Pharisees and chief priests heard these words, their knowledge of Scripture would have taken them straight to the language of today’s Old Testament reading. And, as their minds shifted to the fifth chapter of Isaiah, they suddenly found themselves in a section of Scripture where God brought harsh words of condemnation on the leaders of the people; leaders of the people who had rejected God; leaders of the people who had shown themselves to be an unproductive vineyard and who were ultimately destroyed. In these words, Jesus was establishing the context for His story with words of judgment against the leaders of the people, and the chief priests and Pharisees knew he was talking about them.

Jesus continued, “When the season for fruit drew near, (the master) sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another” (Matthew 21:34-35). These acts alone would have been an outrage to His audience, but to further underscore the seriousness of His story, Jesus went even further: “Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Matthew 21:36-39).

After laying out the details of the dramatic story, Jesus then asked, “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Imagine the scene. As the people pressed in to listen and as the weight of the silence began to grow, the Pharisees and chief priests realized that they had to give an answer. So, with the crowds eagerly awaiting their response, they mustered the only answer they could give: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (Matthew 21:41). In their answer, the Pharisees and chief priests had poetically pronounced judgment on themselves and, as a result, Matthew tells us, their hatred of Jesus reached a new and deadly level (Matthew 21:45-46).

As we read this parable, it's clear to see that the Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus and, as we sit here today, it's easy for us to be disgusted by their pretense and rejection of Jesus. But if that's all we see, then we are missing an important function of this text. You see, this parable not only accuses and unmasks the Pharisees. In this story of rejection, we see that just like the Jewish leaders, we have also rejected the Son. Like the Pharisees, we say we want God's kingdom to come, but we want it to come on *our* terms. We say we want a savior, but secretly we want to save ourselves. When we look at the leaders from today's reading, we are looking in the mirror. They were the church. They were people who knew better. They were people to whom God had been revealed; and yet they were more concerned about the sins of others than the sinfulness of their own hearts. And so are we.

If we only come away from this text with the conviction that the world around us has rejected Jesus, then we've missed the point entirely. You see, we have all rejected the Son. We have all turned our backs on His will for our lives. Every single one of us has denied Christ's control, and the result of our rejection is that we have separated ourselves from God. The fact is that just like the Pharisees, we are naturally opposed to Christ. Paul wrote that, on our own, we do not "have in mind the things of God" (I Corinthians 2:14), and the terrifying truth that we need to hear in this parable is that, just like the Pharisees, when you reject the Son, you are left to face a "miserable death."

The judgment assigned to the tenants in the parable is exactly what our sins deserve, and an eternity in hell is absolutely what we have earned, and there is nothing we can do to negotiate or work our way out of this ultimate predicament. We are in real and serious trouble. And only when we understand our situation. And only when our options for saving ourselves have been exhausted. And only when we are finally broken to pieces by the reality of our dilemma do the words of Christ bring hope.

Jesus said, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Matthew 21:42). In these words, we hear the amazing Good News that God sent His Son to save us, knowing full well that He would be rejected. And Jesus set His divinity aside and submitted Himself to a life of rejection, and endured a miserable death, and He did it all so that we could have eternal life. God didn't wait for us to come around. He didn't wait for us to prove our worth or earn our place. Jesus came at the height of our sin. He assumed responsibility for our wrongs, and He experienced the pain and bitterness of our rejection...but not only that. On the cross, with your sin and my sin, and the sins of all the world loaded on His back, He experienced the rejection of the Father, and He did all of this for us so that we could be forgiven and accepted by God!

The Bible tells us that the Son was rejected to "bring us to God" (I Peter 3:18). And that the rejection of the Son is now the "reconciliation of the world" (Romans 11:15). This means that we are – right now, in this moment – right with God. It means that we are 100% accepted by God and, because we are accepted in Christ, it means that we can accept others. In Christ, there are no outsiders, and in Christ no one is rejected or thrown back or thrown away.

It has been said that behind every face there is a secret sorrow, and the truth is that right now, you can think of a person in your life who in some way is dealing with the pain of rejection or the reality of reversal. So today, in the light of God's love and the freedom of His forgiveness for you, you can extend a word of encouragement or a work of mercy to this brother or sister, and in these acts of grace you will deliver the very acceptance you have experienced in Christ Jesus. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say: "Amen."

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