

Sermon for June 26, 2016 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 9:51-56 NIV84

Theme: How to Handle Rejection of the Gospel:

- 1) *Don't let the fear of it keep you from confessing the truth.*
- 2) *Don't let the experience of it keep you from expressing love.*

⁵¹ *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*

⁵² *And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him;* ⁵³ *but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.* ⁵⁴ *When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"* ⁵⁵ *But Jesus turned and rebuked them,* ⁵⁶ *and they went to another village.*
(Luke 9:51-56 NIV84)

Two months ago I asked you to list some short term goals for our congregation. Most of you agreed that our top priority should be reaching out to members (especially youth) who are straying from the faith.

Now imagine for a moment that your pastor asked you to join a team that will try to engage inactive members with God's Law and Gospel – all in the hope of making them active again. What would your response be? I can tell you how I would feel: I would be afraid. Why? Oh, for a number of reasons. What happens if I say the wrong thing and I offend the people I'm trying to reach? I may not only lose a friend, but their family might be upset with me too. I don't like confrontation. I don't handle rejection well.

But here's the thing: if no one warns the straying, how will they know the danger they are in? We could do nothing, but is that really showing love to them? Or is it just making our life easier because we don't have to face the fear of rejection?

The threat of rejection makes evangelism and reaching out to the straying very difficult work. But it is work that our Savior asks us to do and it's work that needs to be done. How do we overcome our fears? What do we do when our witness is rejected? Let us look to our sermon text for answers to these questions under the theme: **How to Handle Rejection of the Gospel.** 1) *Don't let the fear of it keep you from confessing the truth.* 2) *Don't let the experience of it keep you from expressing love.*

Part One: Don't let the fear of it keep you from confessing the truth.

Our sermon text takes place shortly after Jesus' Transfiguration. We read: *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*

Jesus' Galilean ministry had come to an end. It was time for him to go to Jerusalem to be sacrificed in payment for our sins. The people who once praised him would soon reject him – calling for his crucifixion. Yet Jesus was determined to endure it all. Why? Because He knew how it would end. God the Father would accept his sacrifice for our sins and raise him from the dead. More than that, he would exalt Jesus to the highest place in heaven. Forgiveness would be won for all so that whoever believed in him would not perish but have eternal life.

Confident in what the Scriptures said concerning His work, Jesus resolutely went to Jerusalem – determined to preach his message of repentance and faith wherever he went.¹

Now between Galilee and Jerusalem was a region called Samaria. Most Jews travelled around that region because the Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. But Jesus decided to travel through it. He wanted to preach to the people there like he did once before in another village, when he met a woman at Jacob's well. Many people put their faith in Him at that time. He hoped that many more Samaritans would do the same – for the salvation of their souls.

So, he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him.

The messengers Jesus sent into Samaria could have let their prejudices and fears prevent them from going, but, because Jesus sent them, they went willingly. They trusted in their Master's message - remembering how much hope it gave them. And if the Gospel was able to work such faith and hope in their hearts, the messengers were confident that it had the power to change the hearts of the Samaritans as well.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us learn from the example of Christ and the messengers he sent that the first step in handling rejection is not letting the fear of it prevent us from confessing God's truth. But how do we do that? First of all by understanding how utterly life-changing the Gospel is for us, and then how needful it is for others. Let me explain what I mean.

The best salesmen are those who truly believe in their products. They love talking about their product and answering any question people might have. They have a genuineness about them that can't easily be faked. They aren't afraid of rejection. Why? Because they truly believe that their product will improve the lives of others.

Now, if faith in an earthly product can influence people like that, how much more should the Gospel of Christ. So, dear Christians, do we truly take the time to appreciate the great gift God has given us in the Gospel: that, through faith in Jesus we have the forgiveness of all sin, salvation and eternal life with God? Do we take to heart how important and life changing this news is? Could it be possible that our fear of rejection stems a little from the fact that we don't fully appreciate the Gospel ourselves? If I honestly examine my own sinful heart, I see some truth to that thought.

And this is why we need to be constantly at the foot of the cross in prayer – asking the Holy Spirit to increase our knowledge and faith in the Bible. Our world is dying, and we have the message that will save them. How can we not share the Gospel with those who don't know it? How can we not lovingly warn those who are straying?

Lord, forgive us for the times we have failed to do this. Remind us of your love and mercy once again. Help us see your determination to save us and, in the peace of your forgiveness, give us the same resolve to share your salvation with others. Don't let the fear of rejection keep us from witnessing your truth. Don't let our experience of rejection prevent us from showing love.

Part Two: Don't let the experience of it keep you from expressing love.

How did the people respond to the preparatory preaching of the messengers Jesus sent? *[The] people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.*

Why didn't the Samaritans welcome Jesus? Was it merely because he was Jewish, and they didn't want any Jews in their town? Possibly, but there seems to be more to it than that.

The Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim was the only place God ordained for worship.ⁱⁱ The mere fact that Jesus was determined worship in Jerusalem was a condemnation of their beliefs. How could they accept such a Messiah?

So, in no uncertain terms, the inhabitants of that Samaritan town told the messengers that Jesus was not welcome – all because he didn't fit their preconceived notions of who the Messiah should be. Based on what follows, I can imagine the Samaritans were especially nasty in their rejection of Jesus. I can also imagine Jesus' messengers being rather upset over the whole experience.

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

I don't know if James and John were the messengers Jesus sent or if they simply overheard the report. One thing is certain: they were mad! How could the Samaritans reject the Holy Son of God? Remembering the Old Testament story about how Elijah called down fire on two unbelieving companies of soldiers, they ask Jesus whether or not they should pray the same.

Now before we go on to talk about how bad this outburst of anger was, there are two positives I have to say about James and John. First of all, their words show that they fully believed that Jesus was the Son of God. Secondly, their response also showed that they believed what Jesus taught them concerning prayer: that, if it is in accordance with Christ's will, God will actually grant whatever they prayed for – even if they prayed for a miracle. Oh that we would have such faith in Christ and his Word today! But as admirable as these two positives are, it doesn't change the fact that they called for the death and damnation of an entire village! That was wrong.

Jesus turned and rebuked them. What did Jesus say? We don't know for sure, but some ancient manuscripts record Jesus as saying: *"You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."*

People always seem to want to “get back” at others for the insults they receive. Modern day politics teach that all too well. If someone rejects us or publicly makes us foolish, isn’t it also our first instinct to fume? Don’t we also want to get even – or at least have God get even for us?

But this is not the way of Christ. The Samaritans rejected Jesus - yes, that was a sin. But that doesn’t mean that Jesus immediately wanted their damnation. No, his whole purpose in coming to this earth was to save mankind through his suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. He certainly didn’t want these Samaritans lost in hell. So do you know how he responded to their rejection? With love. He showed no anger or retaliation. He didn’t beg or apologize for offending them with his message either. Jesus knew that the Samaritans would not receive him now; in the future, however, they well might. So what did Jesus do? He simply honored the request of the Samaritans to leave them alone and moved on to another village.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: imagine you share the Gospel in love with someone you thought was a friend, but they reject your witness and tell you to take a hike. How should you respond? Should you call down fire and brimstone on them? Should you apologize for trying to witness the Gospel to them? No, rather do what Jesus did: forgive their sin and move on.

Move on? But what if we care for them? We don’t want them lost in hell. How can we just stop caring and never talk to them again? Wait a minute. I didn’t say that we stop caring. Jesus never stopped caring for the Samaritans who rejected him. And I also didn’t say that we never talk to them again. Jesus didn’t do that with the Samaritans either. He still loved them – so much so that He guided Phillip and other evangelists to spread the Gospel in that region after His Ascension. Even John himself – one of the two that wanted to call down fire on that Samaritan village - became instrumental in their receiving the Holy Spirit.

So when we forgive and move on after being rejected, we aren’t abandoning the people we let alone. Rather we are trusting that the LORD, who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone, will send other workers at different time to witness to them. Who knows, with the passing of time, maybe we ourselves will have opportunity to witness to them again – just like John did with the Samaritans.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ. As you all know, we have a giant task in front of us. There are many de-churched people in our community – some of whom are even members of our congregation. Whether they realize it or not, they are in danger of hell. They need people willing to reach out to them with the Gospel in love. Jesus has gifted you with the Gospel and is calling you to help. Don’t let fear of rejection prevent you from confessing the truth. Don’t let an experience of rejection prevent you from showing love. Trust in Christ. He will use your witness in combination with the witness of others to accomplish his will in his time. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Matthew 4:17

ⁱⁱ Cf. John 4:20