

God of grace, at times your prophets were ignored, rejected, belittled, and unwelcome. Trusting that we, too, are called to be prophets, we ask you to fill us with your Spirit, that we may persevere in speaking your word and living our faith. Amen.

July 8, 2018 – Mark 6:1-13

“Moving Beyond Rejection”

Jerianne is a 56-year-old transgender woman who lives in California. A few years ago, she was admitted to the hospital after being violently beaten by her son-in-law. She was waiting in the hallway of the hospital when a doctor approached her. He told her to strip. She refused, telling the doctor that she didn't want to take her clothes off in the hallway. He then opened the door to her exam room and instructed her to go inside. The doctor refused to enter the room. Coming no further than the doorway, he told her that he would get x-rays for her. After the x-rays results were in, the doctor once again refused to enter Jerianne's hospital room and instead stood at the doorway to relay her results. He told her that she had a broken neck and that someone would be in to give her a neck brace. The doctor walked away, never to be seen again.

Jerianne's ordeal did not end there. Later, while still dressed in her skirt and top, two police officers walked into her room. The officers looked at her with a smirk on their faces and said, "How can we help you, sir?" She felt terrible and scared, in addition to the physical pain she was enduring as a result of the beating. She didn't know how to respond, so she told them to leave. That night, she went home and attempted suicide. (<https://transgenderlawcenter.org/legal/discrimination-stories>)

The night in the hospital still haunts her. She can't find medical care in her area and therefore has to travel over an hour away for fear that she might have the same experience with local doctors. She also has a fear of ever reaching out to the police for help because of the treatment she received that night.

Rejection is a powerful thing. Its trauma frequently impacts our lives, forever changing us in ways that can never be undone. It can erode our confidence and self-esteem, and undermine our fundamental feeling of belonging.

In this morning's reading, Jesus was rejected by his family and hometown friends. They refused to see him as anyone other than their homeboy. When he taught in the synagogue, they asked each other who this know-it-all thought he was, pretending to be a prophet and speaking as if he himself were sent from God. Jesus' homecoming had turned out to be a disaster. And like Jerianne, he may have felt like pulling inward and giving up. But according to our scripture reading, he didn't. In fact, he seems to have managed to transform the negative experience of his rejection into a more positive experience.

To read the Gospel of Mark at face value, it would almost seem as if the incident had not affected him in the least. But I think the author of the Gospel may have left something out. If Jesus was just as fully human as he was divine, I think something must have taken place between his rejection and his commissioning of the disciples. I imagine Jesus retreating as scripture says he often did. I imagine him licking his wounds. I imagine him frustrated and angry and ready to throw in the towel. But I imagine God's angels tending to him as they had done in the wilderness following his baptism. And I imagine him deciding that, although his message would remain the same, there would need to be some adjustments as to how it might be delivered.

MCC churches have also been given a message to share with the world. A message that is also rejected by a whole lot of folks. Our message is one which proclaims that God's love includes everyone, particularly people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Other faith communities struggle with our message, asking the same questions as those asked about Jesus: "Who do you think you are? And from where does your authority come?" And ironically, our message is rejected not only by other faiths, but also by people within our own tribe.

That sort of reception makes a person want to pull inward, close the door, and just forget about sharing any kind of good news with others. Maybe they're right, after all. Maybe we're being presumptuous to think that God has called us to be God's messengers.

But while holding fast to our message of God's all-inclusive love, maybe we could benefit from a look at how Jesus seemed to modify the way in which he delivered his message in this morning's scripture reading.

First, we see that Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs. Previously, we read that he did the teaching, with the disciples following. But by sending disciples out in pairs as partners in the undertaking, not only were the challenges shared with someone else, but also, the risk was lowered of any lone individual taking center stage and grabbing the spotlight. So if we're serious about sharing God's love with others, we need to find someone or several someones who can support us, and pray for us, and share in our joys and our sorrows.

Next, we see Jesus instructing the disciples to take nothing for the journey except a staff. Put on your sandals, he tells them, but don't waste time packing a wardrobe. Forget about food and money; just get going! There seems to be an urgency to the mission. And there is the same sort of urgency in ours. There isn't a how-to manual to read, so it would behoove us to quit looking for one, quit strategizing, and get moving. Our mission is an urgent one, so we need to quit worrying about success, and focus, instead, on obedience.

Jesus told his disciples, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." You can't be in real relationship if you spend your time hopping from person to person, from church to church, or from community to community. God calls us to be in relationship with each other. And that takes time. So who is our neighbor? And what are we doing to deepen our relationship with that neighbor?

And finally, Jesus tells his disciples, "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet." In other words, don't let the past drag you down. Remember the urgency of the mission and move on to the next opportunity.

Jesus must have worried about how his disciples would fare as they set out for the villages. Would they proclaim the message as he would have done? Probably not. Would they also be rejected? More than likely. But in the end, he was able to let go and let God be God. And our reading closes by telling us it was a success. Under these new methods, the disciples were able to succeed where Jesus had only met failure.

Because he was open to change, Jesus' experience of rejection was transformed into a learning experience. Sometimes, good things can come from bad experiences, if we remain open to God working in our lives.

Jerianne remained open to God working in her own life. Following her attempted suicide, Jerianne has since been connected to many LGBTQ leaders in California and has received a lot of support. And she is even now the executive director of a small LGBT center.

There are few things in this world more painful than rejection. Biologically wired with a longing to belong, we fear rejection. But if we avoid it, we aren't truly living. And Jesus said he came that we may have life, and to have it abundantly (John 10:10). So unfortunately, that means we will experience rejection. But it's up to us as to whether we allow it to victimize us or to motivate us. If we allow it to motivate us, we have a chance at overcoming the pain of rejection.

When it comes to sharing the message of God's good news, we can overcome rejection as long as the spotlight stays on the message and not us. We are less likely to experience rejection if we take the time to really develop a connection with our neighbor. But if we do experience rejection, then understand it's not the end of the world. Don't delay, but move on because there are others literally dying to hear the message that they are beloved children of God and that God takes delight in who they are.

May we take up our roles as prophets, proclaiming God's love for all people. And may we persevere in our calling, regardless of the reception of our message. Amen.