

Sunday, July 8 and Wednesday, July 11 + 7th week after Pentecost

Mark 6:1-13

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We have all endured episodes of rejection. Rejection isn't just failure, it's a special kind of failure—the kind in which you lay your soul on the line, and the verdict comes back: We don't care for what you do. We don't like it. We're not interested. Good luck finding somewhere else that might see some purpose to what you're doing, but we don't.

J.K. Rowling experienced rejection on a grand scale. Her first Harry Potter book was rejected 12 times before the independent British publisher Bloomsbury picked up on it. "I wasn't going to give up until every single publisher turned me down," she wrote, "but I often feared that would happen."

J.K. Rowling embodied the best definition of success I've ever heard, from Winston Churchill: "Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." J.K. Rowling believed that what she had to offer was of value. Jesus, of course, knew his transformative mission to redeem a world bound in sin was of great value. But in our Gospel reading today the people of his home town of Nazareth weren't having any of it. At first they're impressed, but they quickly turn on him. As they say in Eugene Peterson's common-language translation of the Bible, "We had no idea he was this

good! How did he get so wise all of a sudden?” But then they remember who Jesus is. “He’s just a carpenter—Mary’s boy. We’ve known him since he was a kid. Who does he think he is?”

Nazareth was not a sophisticated place. Remember Nathanael’s response in John Chapter 1 when Philip begs him to come and see Jesus? “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” At the time it was a small town of fewer than 500, utterly insignificant. It wasn’t even mentioned at all in Jewish historical sources until the third century AD.

Most towns would welcome back their success stories, especially if they hadn’t had many of them. A couple of years ago in Beloit, it was a big deal when hometown boy Jim Caldwell, then coach of the Detroit Lions, came back to receive an award.

Here in Nazareth, however, we find ourselves face to face with small-town prejudice and jealousy. Jesus was known only as the carpenter’s son. Accounts of what he’d been doing, amazing healings and other miracles, clearly hadn’t made it yet to Nazareth yet. “Who does this carpenter think he is?” the people are probably saying to each other. “He has no formal education and comes from a family of no special importance. How can he possibly have the right to teach in the synagogue?”

The people are dead set against him. So it’s no surprise that Jesus can’t get anywhere with them. Mark writes, “Jesus could do no deed of power there.” It probably made them angrier when he laments that prophets are not without honor except in their home town. At this point in Luke’s Gospel, where we find an elaborated version of

this same incident, Jesus continues to chastise the people. The scene ends with them in a blind rage, trying to throw him off a cliff.

What's wrong here? It's not a matter of faith being weak. These people had no faith. They were unable to receive anything that Jesus was saying or doing. This reminds us how important we are in the equation. Everything that Jesus said and did, everything about him, has meaning and significance only when received by hearts of faith.

Remember in an earlier reading what Jesus said to Jairus, the synagogue ruler, shortly before he restored Jairus' daughter to life? "Do not fear; only believe." You might recall that Jesus had stopped to minister to the hemorrhaging woman, and in the meantime Jairus' daughter died. What if Jairus had dismissed Jesus then and there—"Forget it, you're too late, you got distracted by that bleeding woman and my daughter died, so nothing more can be done"—instead of embracing Jesus' command to believe?

Jesus' purpose on earth wasn't to demonstrate his power over storms, disabilities, and demons. All that Jesus did and said involves us and the state of our hearts. We receive the good news of who he is and what he has done in hearts that are open, and humble, and trusting. Faith blossoms in the good soil of God's love, with God doing the growing. It all begins with those five words: "Do not fear; only believe."

But the people of Nazareth were consumed by fear. How do we know this? Because their hearts were hardened against Jesus to an extent that Jesus himself could hardly grasp. Mark tells us that "Jesus was amazed at their unbelief."

Most of us have probably experienced hardened hearts at some point in our lives. Such a heart may even have been ours. This hardness is the product of pride run amok, pride being the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. And pride is born out of deep-rooted fear—fear of being insignificant, fear of failure, fear of not getting your way. Fear that makes you dig in to your own position because you can't stand the idea that someone else's idea might be better than yours. Fear that drives you to extremism to maintain the illusion of superiority and control.

Pride begets jealousy, which manifests itself as the impulse to reject anything that might expose one's own inadequacies. This is how people come to be bullies, racists, xenophobes, control freaks. Within these hardened hearts is where the ability to become categorically cruel takes root. What is one to do?

The second part of the Mark reading gives us the answer. What did Jesus do in the face of this sea of hardened hearts in his hometown? He moved on. He had work to do. Jesus knew it wouldn't do any good to argue with the people of Nazareth or to try to change them. Arguing exhausts the spirit. So he moved on. He went about, among the villages, teaching.

When you encounter resistance, don't try to crack open hardened hearts. Only God can do that, and you will drain your spirit by trying. Simply move on. Each of you is a disciple of Jesus with work to do. Jesus is calling you through the unique gifts God has given you. He is sending you out. Travel light just as the disciples did. Leave your

baggage behind. Your mission is simply to live as a member of God's kingdom, in which every action and decision is governed by love. And when you encounter resistance, stay cool, shake the dust off your sandals, and move on. The world is waiting for you.