

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Some of you here this morning have never experienced rejection. Some of you have never been hurt by someone you love. I am really happy for you. But that makes this Gospel incomprehensible to you. I don't know what to say to you.

The Gospel today is spoken to the losers. It's for those who experienced rejection. It's for those who were turned down for that first date. It's for those who were chosen last for a pick-up ball game. It's for those who didn't make the team. It's for those who have suffered the pain of divorce. It's for the unemployed or the under-employed. It's for those whose bodies are failing them, inflicting sickness, pain, or disease. It's for the child who has felt rejected by a parent or a parent whose adult child never comes to visit anymore.

Christ tells this parable to the very people, the chief priests of the Temple and the elders of the people, who were rejecting him. He likens them to the tenant farmers who beat and stoned and killed those he sent to collect his fair share of the produce grown on his farm, including his own son. Those he spoke to clearly understood what he was saying to them—that they were just like those tenant farmers and that He was “the stone that the builders rejected who has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes”. And they, the chief priests and the elders of the people, hated Him all the more and became more determined to kill Him.

What's important here, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is to reflect on how Jesus handled this rejection. He was misunderstood by his own family. Many of them thought he was crazy. He was cast out by his own townspeople. They were ready to throw him off the side of a mountain. He was despised by the leaders of his own religion who conspired to kill him. And, finally, he was crucified by his own nation. That is rejection! How did he handle it?

First of all, Jesus never gave up and he never gave in. He didn't try to change himself to please anybody. He stood his ground and proclaimed to all who would hear him that He had been sent by his Father to establish His Kingdom here on earth. Rejection didn't defeat him. It seemed to make him stronger.

It reminds me of a remarkable African-American woman that I know. I'll call her Justine. She was the fifth child of a woman who simply could not or would not take care of her. Her mother left her, like Moses, in a basket, on the porch of her ex-husband's mother. Her grandmother cared for her and raised her for 22 years. The girl went on to college and eventually earned her MBA from Harvard University. Some twenty years later she had become the Chief Financial Officer of a Fortune 500 company and was also well-known for her philanthropy, especially in the area of providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth. She once told me that the pain of her mother's rejection motivated her more than anything else to become successful so that she could help other children who

had experienced rejection. She said, “The statement about Jesus being the head cornerstone, the redemptive blood of my Savior, and my relationship with him was what helped me to first of all forgive my mother and pushed me to want to be the cornerstone for other children who were rejected.”

That is the other way in which Jesus handled his rejection. Not only did he not allow it to change him, it motivated him, it encouraged him, it pushed him to the tree on Calvary to save all of humanity. From that tree of ignominy, those of us who have experienced rejection and have felt wounded even by loved ones, if we listen with our whole hearts, we can hear him say, “I see so much possibility in you that I give my life for you. Don’t give up! I know you are hurting. I know your pain. This rejection will not defeat you. Hold on to me as I am holding on to you. Trust me! Now serve others as I am serving you.”

My friend, Justine, heard Jesus speak from the Cross something like those words and she became, like him, a wounded healer.

I don’t know why Jesus had to suffer and die. Why wasn’t he born in Caesar’s house, rather than a stable in Bethlehem? Then, he could have established his kingdom by royal decree. It would have been so much easier, and certainly less painful. But, of course, that’s our human way of thinking. What came from the heart and mind of God is different.

God’s way was that Christ’s entire life was to be defined by rejection—by his family, his community, his religious leaders, and the leaders of his nation. But, if he had not been rejected, how could he minister to us in our rejections? If he had not experienced life’s most heart-breaking difficulties and disappointments, how could he help us as we struggle through the dark valleys of our own lives?

That’s why I suggested at the beginning of this message that those of you who have not had to suffer through such struggles cannot comprehend this Gospel. It is for those who have been rejected or wounded or suffered terrible loss.

Last weekend I was in Boston to celebrate my niece’s wedding. There I encountered two young men from Houston. I asked them how they survived the disaster of Hurricane Irma that devastated their city. One said, “It’s funny, but I think it’s the best thing that ever happened to our city. It didn’t matter what language you spoke, what color you were, what your religion was, whether you were republican or democrat, liberal or conservative, rich or poor. We were all the same. We all helped each other. We even sacrificed ourselves for each other—perfect strangers. We are all better for what we lost. Houston will be a far greater city as we rebuild it and rebuild our lives.” I asked them what brought them to Boston. The other said, “We came up here to beat the Red Sox!” Ah, once again they were disappointed.

So, yes, this Gospel and this message is for those of us who are losers, who have been rejected, who have suffered terrible pain, or great loss. Jesus is for us the cornerstone upon which we build our lives so that we can become the wounded healers who are the cornerstones upon which others can depend. In this way, God's way, His Kingdom will come to be on earth as it is in heaven.