

Love & Acceptance

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

In the week I was reading an article by Nadia Bolz-Weber about the stressors on the modern human. She writes:

... A baby born today is biologically identical to a baby born during the ice age. Which means we are constantly trying to run Mac OS 14 Sonoma on 1984 Apple Macintosh computers and they keep glitching out: anxiety, loneliness, depression, addiction, disease.

It got me thinking about a connected aspect of modern life for which we simply are not designed and that is the problem of loneliness. Our ice-age brains, as the author terms them, are made for connection with other people. If nothing else, it is a survival instinct that we need to be together in order to have a better chance of making it through the next season alive. It means we need the companionship of other people to experience wholeness and one of the worst things that can be done to us emotionally is to experience rejection.

Both of our New Testament readings deal with stories about rejection. Paul is writing to the people of Corinth, and he has had a bit of a tense relationship with them. On this occasion the church in Corinth have been approached by other teachers who have encouraged the church to ignore the Gospel and to do their own thing. In the part of Second Corinthians that we hear today, Paul responds to the other teachers' claims that they are better than him. Of course, there may well be some legitimacy to such a claim. One of the primary "qualifications" to be an apostle was to have known Jesus during his ministry and Paul, by his own admission, did not meet that requirement.

In his culture, one would have expected Paul to return, boast for boast in order for him to "prove" his credentials. This would have been a quite acceptable response. Instead, although Paul does boast indirectly by speaking of his experience in the third person, this is not his focus. Essentially, he says to look at the actions of the person and not the words. As one commentator wrote:

Paul is content to let the record of his relation to them stand on its own; as he wrote near the start of the letter fragment "look at what is before your eyes." Paul will not use any vision or revelation, no matter how grand, to trump his own day-to-day performance – that is what they see in him or hear from him. If the intruders are boasting of their visions and revelations, Paul one-ups them with this extraordinary heavenly journey and then, irony of ironies, refuses to build a care for his authority upon that, choosing instead to let the matter be decided by what they have seen and heard in him.

Paul is taking the effort to rebuild the relationship after a rift caused by the other teachers who came to Corinth. We do not know whether or not his efforts worked, but we do know there was long-standing correspondence between Paul and this church, so quite possibly the relationship was restored.

In our Gospel reading hear two other stories of rejection. In the first story Jesus goes home to Nazareth and the people there expect big things. However, as happens all too frequently when the children whose bottoms we wiped as babies grow into adults, it is hard to make that mental shift to recognising their gifts and skills.

“Where did that wisdom come from?” It’s one of those questions that are all too easy to ask when we see the child as an adult reflecting on the issues we face. Similarly, like the people of Nazareth, it is all too easy to dismiss the wisdom because we knew the person as a child. This story reminds us of the difficulties we have when we are called to be prophetic in our own community, and it is one of the reasons that bringing in a person from outside can generate more change than hearing the same thing from someone who is part of the community.

Then, we also get the story of the disciples being sent out. As they are given their instructions, they are also told how to respond to rejection. There is not promise that they will be successful in their mission, only that they need to try.

In the culture of the day, shaking the dust off shoes was something that was done as Jewish people returned home from travel into Gentile areas. It was a symbol of getting rid of every last bit of defilement they may have encountered in their travels. The disciples are told to use this simple action when they are not accepted. Other itinerant preachers of the day would take much more dramatic (and even manipulative) approaches to dealing with rejection. The disciples are told to have none of this. They are just to make a simple action and go on their way.

So, this brings us to reflecting on the important question of how we deal with rejection too. The need for human relationship is recognised broadly in psychological literature as a basic human need, along with food, water, and shelter. It is all too easy to turn around and attack the other because we feel we are not welcomed or even are actively rejected by them. This is a very normal human response, though we are called to respond differently and have models how to do that.

However, the reverse is also worth considering. When have we as a community, even inadvertently, been experienced as not being welcoming to those who seek to join us? It might not be a deliberate rejection, but it certainly can still be experienced in that way. How do we respond when people *feel* they have been rejected by us? It’s important to value the validity of that feeling and go beyond our ice-age brain’s tendency to experience this as an attack on “us.”

As we continue to explore how we can be more welcoming as a community, let me encourage you to identify at least one thing you personally can do to ensure that next time we have someone new joining us, they know they are welcomed.