

Rejection and Response
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
Proper 9B (RCL); July 5, 2009
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Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.

Our readings this morning have to do with the experience of rejection and our human response to it. In the first lesson, Ezekiel is sent by the Lord to speak the prophetic word to Israel. This comes at a low moment in that nation's history, a moment of rebellion against the way and will of God. There's a strong chance the people won't be inclined to heed the word of the prophet. Not to worry, says the Lord; even if they dismiss you, even if they fail to obey, they will at the very least know they've been addressed by the Lord through the prophet. That is sufficient.

The same theme carries forward centuries later. In the epistle, Paul, speaking in the third person, notes that he's experienced all a human being might hope for in relation to God. He has seen ecstatic visions of heaven, Paradise, and he's heard divine wisdom so deep it cannot be repeated. In spite of this, he's been tormented by a thorn in the flesh (lots of speculation about this but no one knows what that means) and, due to his public witness, he's endured weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and calamity; rejection with a capital R.

And now, for the scriptural trifecta, we turn to the gospel. A few decades prior to the production of Paul's letter, Jesus returns to his home village and teaches in the synagogue. Those who hear him are first astounded and then offended. Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? Who is he to lecture us? Their derision disempowers the miracle-worker or, more accurately, makes them less amenable to healing. Jesus stands apart, amazed at their unbelief. He then sends his disciples out to extend the mission; teaching, healing, liberating people from besetting demons. If you are well-received, he commands, stay put. If you are rejected, shake the dust off your feet and move on.

So there it is - rejection. In the context of pastoral counseling we try to give people tools for responding to this inevitable human experience. There are three basic moves in life, we say; any of the three can be made in a way that is either healthy or unhealthy. When rejected, we can move against the other, we can move away, or we can move toward. Against, away, toward – the three steps immediately available to us.

We are, this weekend, observing a celebration of “healthy moving against” – that’s what the 4th of July is all about. Our demands for justice were rejected, we moved against the oppressor, and we now enjoy freedom. News-watchers have recently observed many in Iran making that same move, not settling for fraud, corruption, or oppression but bravely and non-violently moving against those forces to bear witness to a new possibility for their country. May God bless and protect them.

Jesus, in today’s gospel, takes a different tack. He moves not against those who dismiss him but away from them. He marvels at their unbelief. It’s as though he delivers a feast to emaciated people and they turn their skinny backs on it. He brings wisdom, love and healing power; his former neighbors resist that by returning him to a social location familiar to them. You can still hear it, two thousand years later: Who does he think he is? Jesus not only moves away from that short-sightedness but counsels his followers to do the same.

Paul takes yet another path. He doesn’t necessarily move towards those who assault him but he does move toward the bitter fruit of public enmity. It’s not just that he endures weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and calamity – he embraces all that. All of that leaves him oddly content because, in weakness, God’s power is revealed. He didn’t discover that on his own, he says – the word of the Lord came to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

That’s not, by the way, a celebration of spiritual masochism but a statement of deep spiritual truth. Ask anyone who has enjoyed liberation from addiction, for instance; they will assure you that their healing began the very moment they admitted defeat, surrendered, and asked for help. And I’ve seen something similar in those who suffer from grave illness or, more rarely, even violence – they would, of course, never choose any of that for themselves but, within the experience, they discover an abiding power and presence that would have been inaccessible apart from their pain. The pain is devastating and some of it, that which we inflict on one another, is sinful, but the consolation is real – more real, at times, than any other part of the experience.

I said a minute ago that there are three moves we can make when rejected – against, away, toward. Let me now add a fourth – we can move in. We can get introspective. We can examine our own heart and our own behavior. There are times when we endure rejection simply because we get too close, because the other needs to repel us in order to reestablish the space they require to thrive and prosper.

And here now is a possible case in point: Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, will be in Anaheim this week addressing our General Convention. Some are concerned that he might try to get too close to the affairs of the Episcopal Church, particularly in the area of inclusion, in an effort to maintain

global harmony. I'm not so sure about that. I hope that he'll heed his own words of wisdom offered years ago in a homily entitled, "My Neighbor's Business." In that sermon he notes our almost universal human tendency to write scripts wherein we are the lead actor and where everyone else is a bit player, put into the scene to make us stand out. The problem, of course, is that the other actors refuse to properly play their roles.

Williams writes, "Sooner or later we are bound to come up against one very unpalatable fact: other people are unwilling to play the parts for which we have cast them – as unwilling as we are to let ourselves be defined by them. Even without a conscious clash of will, even when someone else is simply unaware of our attempts to define and dominate, we shall meet resistance – the resistance of the sheer otherness of the other person. We shall find ourselves confronted by the utter unexpectedness, the unpredictability, of others... the intractable, odd, baffling, resistant, singleness of a person whom, with all our pigeonholing, we have not even begun to know... it dawns on us that our minds and imaginations cannot, after all, dictate to reality, or even begin to comprehend it."

So what do we do in the midst of that relational confusion? Let me here suggest that the truly mature return to God and self. They begin to wonder how they might move forward faithfully and without manipulation. Instead of twisting and contorting and bending the world in an effort to reshape it according to their liking, they themselves become lithe and flexible, strong and pliant, capable of gently standing within their own truth even as they allow others to do the same. They stand still and allow others to find a place next to, near, around, or away from them – whatever best fits the need of the other in that moment.

And that, I think, is finally what Jesus is about in today's gospel. He brings a feast of love and wisdom to starving people but he refuses to force-feed them. They will have to come to the table on their own and in their own time and, perhaps, with their own kind. He makes the same offer to us. He gives us full freedom to either gorge or fast; the choice is ours. But I am the bread of life, he says; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, whoever trusts in me shall never thirst. Amen.