

+ Luke 20:9-19 + Journey to the Cross: A Rented Vineyard + 5th Sunday in Lent + 21 March 2010 +

Rejection is always ugly. Rejection always leaves in its wake sorrow, pain, hurt, worry, fear, even despair. Rejection is one of the few things that no person in their right mind wants for themselves or their loved ones. You and I don't want to be anywhere near it, so then why does Jesus encourage his own rejection? He's not out of his mind. Surely he didn't want to be rejected, but yet he had good reason to embrace rejection only two days from suffering and the cross. We see it here at the last stop on our journey these Sundays in Lent, but it's a difficult stop to make. On the one side we see Jesus confronting his enemies in the temple courts and warning them of the destruction they could face for rejecting him. On the other side we see the foolish, stubborn tenants of a man who planted a vineyard and wanted his rightful portion of the harvest. The rejection of our Savior is hard to watch because it reminds us of those times when we've joined his enemies in their rejection, yet even in Christ's rejection, we still find hope for hearts like ours.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" A few weeks before, Jesus spoke those words on the road to Jerusalem. How his heart of love longed to gather to himself those who had rejected him! Time and again for centuries, God had sent prophet after prophet to call his people to repent and live, ***"...but you were not willing!"***

That rejection was no different in Jesus' day. Oh, how the people had rejoiced when Jesus entered Jerusalem! How they had cried out "Lord, save us...***Hosanna!***" Still everywhere he went, there were his enemies. ***"Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"*** Later when he was teaching in the temple, they tried to interrupt him by questioning his authority to teach, but Jesus kept teaching and instead directed his words at them.

Still they rejected Jesus for who he was—the long-promised Messiah, fulfiller of all the prophecies they knew so well. That rejection would soon turn itself into hateful, murderous action. Of course, the all-knowing Son of God knew their plots and plans. Of course, he knew how their rejection would mean his own suffering and death, but still the Savior loved them and wanted them to repent and live. He gave them one more chance as he told the heartbreaking story of an owner's loving care rejected.

"A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard." It was rather common in Israel. A man planted a large vineyard and hired out farmers to work the land. He went away for some time while they cared for it. At harvest time, he sent a servant to get his rightful share of the grapes produced at his vineyard. The workers would sell the rest for themselves.

...But that's not what happened. No, those tenants beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. So the owner sent another servant, who was also beaten, ***"treated shamefully"***, and sent away empty-handed. The owner sent still another servant. He was beaten so badly ***"they wounded him and threw him out."*** If you or I were in that owner's sandals, I'm sure we would probably have had such rude and violent renters tossed out or arrested long ago, but in a remarkable display of long-suffering patience, the owner gave them one more chance. He said, ***"What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."***

Sadly that would never happen. They had rejected the owner and would reject his son. When they saw the owner's son, ***"they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said, 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."*** In their foolishness, they killed the son, which didn't bring them inheritance, but instead brought the owner's rejection and wrath. In fact, he would kill the tenants ***"and give the vineyard to others."***

Jesus' listeners could only gasp, ***"May this never be!"***, but Jesus reminded them of a prophecy of rejection in Psalm 118. He asked, ***"Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."*** That stone, of course, was Jesus himself, but woe to anyone who rejects him. Those who reject Christ will eventually be broken or crushed by his wrath.

Those who had hailed Jesus as king would soon call for his crucifixion. This call for the death of Christ would be egged on by those who should've known better—the teachers of the law and chief priests. Jesus had unmasked their rejection and his story only stoked it. ***"[They] looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people."*** Soon their fear of the people would no longer hold back their rejection of the Christ and their plans to kill him. Sadly

their rejection of Jesus and his messengers would also later bring God's wrath, when a Roman army would lay waste to Jerusalem and crush those who killed the Son.

Now you might wonder, "What does this have to do with me? I'm a Christian after all!" Hear the warning of our Savior for any who might reject Christ or his teaching today, especially those who call themselves Christians. Remember Jesus' audience—his enemies, who were the theologians and chief priests of the people. If they, who should've known better, could do it, could not you or I? Remember they followed a long line of people who had rejected God's Word, his messengers, and ultimately his Messiah. Couldn't that be said of our present generation? Remember you are sons and daughters of Adam, who rejected his gracious and holy God for Satan and death. Remember that by nature **"the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."** Remember whose rejection sent Christ to the cross and nailed him to the tree—yours and mine.

Before you object, consider this. Who of us has not taken God's Word lightly at some time? Who of us has not brushed off or taken lightly a strong word of condemnation for a selfish sin we love to commit? Who of us has not taken for granted the life-giving words of the absolution—"I forgive you all your sins..."—of the Gospel itself? Who of us has not thought, "I don't want to hear that because that doesn't make sense to me or I don't want to do that or I don't want to be kept from doing that or I don't like that"? Who of us has not plotted with the tenants of this sinful world in raising our hands against the Son? Who of us is not guilty of joining Jesus' enemies in raising the hammer to pound the nails into his hands and feet? Who of us does not deserve the eternal condemnation of the Master? Woe to any who thinks he could never reject God and his Word, for even the builders rejected the capstone!

What heartbreak! What sadness! What rejection we see at this final stop of our journey to the cross, yet here in this vineyard, in this temple court, we also see grace in all its glorious beauty. We see hope for ourselves, for the Church, and for the future. We see the good news at the end.

We see it in the patient love and care of the owner. That, my friends, is a picture of the long-suffering love of our gracious and holy God. He didn't need to keep sending his prophets to people who rejected him. He didn't need to give up the life of his Son for a world that rejected him. He doesn't need to show all that love for sinners like you and me, but in his grace, in his long-suffering love, he does. He provides the opportunity for our ears to hear his Word, for his good news to work faith in our hearts. He provided the opportunity for his Holy Spirit to work through water and the Word to cleanse our hearts and make us members of his family through faith in his Son.

We see it in the willing sacrifice of his Son. All along we've seen this grace, this love, this Gospel. We saw it in how the Savior at the very beginning of his ministry took the war for our unworthy souls directly to Satan. We saw it in how the Savior resolved to go to the cross in spite of every opposition around him. We saw it in the tough love of a Savior calling his beloved children to repent. We saw it in his love for the absolutely unworthy. We've seen it all along and we see it here in his rejection. Jesus knew what was coming only a couple days later. Jesus knew it and still went through it all, because he loved you and me and thought of us every step of the way in spite of our opposition, our impenitence, our rejection.

It is that same willing love that leads the Savior to abandon his tomb on Easter Sunday so you and I might live. It is that love that gives us hope, because **"the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"** as he makes us the holy, **"living stones"** of his one, holy Christian Church. It is that love that moves Jesus to give us his body and blood with bread and wine for us to touch and taste and see his forgiveness and life for us. It is that love that gives us the hope of heaven in the end.

As we near the end of our journey, look back and see the golden theme that weaved its way through our every stop—the golden theme of the undying, unbelievable grace of God. The hymnist put it best in one of our new hymns, **"What grace is this? How can it be? He wears this raw humility to lift me to eternity. Such grace—sweet grace—for me."** It's time to see that grace in all its fullness as the Savior comes to save. Amen.