

Painful Rejection

The Passion of Christ from John 18-19

We all suffer rejection of one form or another throughout our lives. We deal with most rejections, and although hurt by them, perhaps even made angry by them, we recover and move on. Some rejections, though, can deeply scar us. Some can even alter our behavior, usually for the worst.

My first remembrance of being rejected was in the seventh grade. There was this beautiful girl in my class. She made it hard for me to focus on what the teacher was saying. I was a dreamy-eyed 12-year old experiencing those first pangs of what I thought was love. I was also very shy as a pre-teen, gangly and unsure of myself. My infatuation went on and on. Finally one day I couldn't stand it any longer. I wrote out a short note expressing my attraction to her, put it in a small envelope, passed it down the row to her in class, and held my breath. I watched her open it, frown, and then chuckle. She looked over at what had to be my expectant face and shook her head. Then she passed the note to her friend sitting next to her, who read it and also laughed. The note was then torn in half. To say that I was humiliated was an understatement. It felt like every person in the class was staring at me and laughing. Of course, I survived the whole thing. However, it made such a lasting impression on me that I still remember her name – Joyce Silver. Since then I have survived other forms of rejection, as have we all.

Rejection comes in many forms, romantic being just one. Peer rejection is one of the worst. As kids and teenagers we desperately want to belong, because to belong is to be accepted by others, and to be accepted is to be loved. As adults we also face rejection. We get passed over for promotion, or worse, we are terminated from our job.

Abraham Maslow was a pioneer in the field of behavioral science in the 1960s and 70s. He formulated his Hierarchy of Needs, a pyramid consisting of five levels. Maslow said that one had to fulfill one level in one's life before one could move to the next higher level. The first level at the bottom of the pyramid is survival. We need air, food, and water before anything else can happen. The second level is safety – we need morality, health, security from harm, and for adults, employment. The third level is love and belonging, where we need friendship and family.

As we grow up, our parents are supposed to provide the elements of the first two levels for us. They are also supposed to be the formative aspect of level three, giving us love and a deep sense of being someone important and valued in the family structure. If our sense of being loved and belonging is intact, then we can move to Maslow's fourth level, enjoying self-esteem, confidence, achievement, and respect from others.

Two days ago, April 20th, marked the twelfth anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre. It now serves as the classic example of what deep rejection can do to the human psyche. Klebold and Harris were outside the mainstream of normal teenagers. They had been rejected by their peers and had become involved in the Goth culture, wearing black and seeking to draw attention to themselves. I don't doubt that the two of them were loved by their parents in some fashion. But they weren't loved enough to be included in Maslow's third level of love and belonging. The parents didn't understand their sons and thus distanced themselves from their activities. The boys had Goth paraphernalia and guns in their rooms, as well as writings expressing depression, rejection, and hatred. The parents didn't know, because they never went into their rooms. They never sat down and tried to talk to their sons about their lives, who their friends were, how they were doing, and what their struggles were. In a word, they were not involved in their son's lives at all. Both at home and at school, Harris and Klebold were rejected and isolated. They had only each other, and rejection had scarred them deeply, pushing them into actions over which they seemingly did not have any control. The result was twelve students and one teacher killed, and twenty-one students injured. It set off public outrage and calls for examination of gun control laws, the violence of video games and movies, and the Goth culture. What it should have set off was an examination of the deeply rooted importance of families loving and bonding with their children at their

formative ages to help develop within them the truth that they are loved, that they do belong, and thereby give them the self-esteem to deal with rejection when it comes.

Good Friday is about Jesus' pain, suffering, and tortuous death. It is also about his rejection. Tonight we have walked through our Lord's rejection by the religious establishment, his disciples, the community, and the governing authorities. But Good Friday is also about the rejections we experience in our own lives. Unless we take a purely intellectual approach to the events of this night, and I don't understand how we can really do that, then the rejection of Jesus in his last hours has to touch us and bring to remembrance some of our own rejections.

The antidote for rejection is love. When we are rejected as kids, it is our parent's and family's love that bolsters us. When we are rejected as adults, we turn to our spouse, and our closest friends for that reassurance that we are going to be okay.

I am a pastor, a minister of the gospel. You may think that what I am about to say now is because I am expected to say it because of my calling. You would be wrong. I am going to say it because I believe it with every fiber of my being. We need more than the love of other people, of family and friends. We need to know deeply in our hearts the love of God. Children need to be raised in loving families, yes; they also need to be raised in a faith community. Our children need to be in Sunday school; they need to be in church.

Jesus on this night died an agonizing death. For whom did he willingly die? For all those who had rejected him, for all of humanity, past, present, and future. That is love! When all else fails, we know that we are unconditionally loved by God in Christ. If we ever find ourselves isolated and totally rejected, as did the Holocaust victims and wartime prisoners-of-war, to know in one's heart the love of Christ is to be rescued, it is to be able to withstand rejection, and if one physically survives the ordeals into which one has been plunged, it is to have the foundation for recovery and wholeness yet again.

Our rejections over the years may have been painful. To remember them is, perhaps, to recall some of that pain. To understand what Jesus endured this fateful night is to be made aware of the depth of his own rejections. To remember that he died for us, for our sins, for our rejections, is to know the love of Christ in our hearts. And that love, when it is drawn upon, will withstand any pain, any rejection that we may have to endure. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 22 April 2011
[Good Friday]