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Ministry of Rejection

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I've been learning a lot about rejection since I began serving here at Church of the Good Shepherd about a year and a half ago. Not from any of you, it's just part of the territory that comes with campus ministry. My first lesson came when I attended a diocesan meeting just a few months after I arrived for all campus ministers and priests serving parishes located on or near college and university campuses as we are. In that meeting, the Rev. Karl Stevens, who is the canon missionary of campus ministries and many of us know, told us that he had learned campus ministry is a ministry of rejection. And I soon discovered what he meant.

As your priest-in-charge, I have the honor of participating in campus ministry in many ways, a few of which are: speaking on religion panels, leading public prayer, and assisting fellow area clergy and lay leaders staffing an information table for the Interfaith Association at Ohio University's New Student Orientation in June. While I've been welcomed by the hosts of those events, I have not always been welcomed by the people who make up the community. Most of the time, I experience rejection. Granted, most of it is polite rejection. People will pass me by when distributing Ashes in front of the church on Ash Wednesday and say, "No, thank you." The same is true when I staff the interfaith table at New Student orientation, most students and parents give the table a glance and when they see the words "faith", "spirituality" and "religion" on our sign they politely decline stopping.

It is not easy nor pleasant being turned down, especially repeatedly. And it can be draining. I attribute the rejection to a public aversion to religion, as the folks who study trends tell us that now we are seeing the first generation raised by parents who have no church affiliation reaching adulthood. So naturally, these young adults will not be inclined to find a church. They had no such reservations about posing for a picture with Rufus, the OU mascot, who is just one table down from the Interfaith Table at Orientation.

However, this year I saw rejection rise to a whole new level when the new students and their families rejected every single table in our room.

Let me explain how the room I spent a week in works for new students and their families: Starting at 7:30 in the morning, new students and parents are admitted and begin the process of orientation. First, the parents get name tags and the new students get their pictures taken for their student IDs. They also get their room assignments, as orientation is a two day process. After the students get their picture taken and their room assignment, they are free to browse a number of tables set up to represent different parts of campus life including our table on religion and spirituality; there is also sports, semester abroad program, and more. The idea is to give the students time to explore these options while their IDs print. As I said, most of the time, people pass by the Interfaith Table, but they usually stop at the study abroad table and at least get their picture taken with Rufus whether or not their parents sign up to buy football tickets.

This year, however, my colleagues and I who were helping with orientation saw an unusual and slightly disturbing phenomenon, After going through the mandatory stations, the new students and their parents formed a line, a perfectly straight line in the middle of the room and stood in that line, intentionally avoiding not only the Interfaith table, but all the tables. This was a surprise to those who were working the tables. They tried to approach to line standers in order to give their elevator speech about their program or invite people to get their picture taken with Rufus. The line standers responded by silently moving away, as a line, keeping its perfect shape, and avoiding eye contact.

A few brave souls dared to break the line when they saw a table that was important to them, but even when the student in charge of orientation told the line standers there was no reason to stand in line, that they were free to move around, to browse the tables, they held their place in line.

This was a type of rejection I'd not seen before; as I said it was both fascinating and disturbing at the same time as it reminded me of many of the science fiction stories I've read. No matter how hard any of us tried, most of the new students and their families rejected what we were offering and showed their rejection by standing in line.

After such an experience, I couldn't help but remember this phenomenon after reading today's Gospel where we saw Jesus was rejected too. It is easy to forget that the Gospels tell of Jesus being rejected several times by all kinds of people. Today we heard how the author of Luke's Gospel told of Jesus' rejection by the Samaritans. Historians and scholars remind us the Jews of Jesus' day and the Samaritans did not get along at all as they had religious, and political

differences. This is perhaps why the Samaritans rejected Jesus, because Luke told us Jesus had his “face set on Jerusalem”, which to the Samaritans meant that although he was willing to be with them, he did not intend to worship with them, as the Samaritans did not see Jerusalem as their religion center. Instead they worshiped at a mountain called Mt. Gerazim.

Scholars and historians also remind us that to deny someone hospitality in Jesus’ day was a serious cultural offense, as it made a person vulnerable and exposed to the elements. Being turned away by the Samaritans meant Jesus and his followers had to keep moving on without food or water or rest under shelter. So this rejection Jesus received isn’t something to be taken lightly. It was not just an insult, a slap in the face, it could also be seen as a refusal to acknowledge their basic needs.

We heard in the Gospel that when two of Jesus’ disciples discovered Jesus had been rejected they were so upset, offended and angry they responded to those emotions in ways that are all too familiar: they wanted to produce an act of violence to take revenge on the offenders. This is easy to understand. When someone is hurt it is considered perfectly natural to respond by lashing out and hurting the person who caused the pain, whether the pain is emotional or physical. Revenge is such a common motivator often investigators of violent crimes like the mass shootings we are becoming all too used to hearing about look into the life of the perpetrator, to see if they felt rejected or offended. Sometimes feelings of rejection play a role in a person’s decision to join hate groups or extremist groups who focus on hurting or bringing down whoever the group has decided to hate.

All of this makes Jesus’ response to his own rejection important. We heard Jesus rejected the notion of revenge by rebuking those disciples who wanted to use their power to violently attack the people in the Samaritan village who rejected Jesus. This might not be a big surprise to you and me, as we often equate Jesus with forgiveness, love and tolerance. But to his disciples this was a big change from the Old Testament stories where prophets like Elijah and Elisha often did repay rejection with violence, which you can read about in 1 Kings. The author of Luke was trying to show those of us who read the Gospels and attempt to follow Jesus as best we can what was important to Jesus; what he was about and how he was different.

Jesus was not about intimidating or frightening people. He was not about getting the biggest number of followers possible. He didn't hire an advisor to help him learn what to say to each village he entered so people would like him and follow him. Jesus was not about raising large amounts of money to live a comfortable lifestyle. Jesus was set on going to Jerusalem, to fulfilling his mission of loving the people of world, even the people who rejected him. Luke's Gospel eludes to this in the second chapter when Jesus was born and laid in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn; a way of saying he was rejected even at his birth. Rejection didn't stop Jesus from showing God's love, even in the rejection of the crucifixion because God's love isn't dependent on us. God's love isn't conditional on what we do or say. God's love is. And in Luke's Gospel we see how God's love is stronger than rejection and can even use rejection of God to become resurrection life in God.

Which might help us when we read Jesus' response to would-be followers we also heard about in our Gospel this morning. Jesus might have come across as rude or inconsiderate in his responses to those who asked to follow him or whom he invited to follow him. But I wonder if he was speaking about how all who follow Jesus must learn to deal with rejection in a Christ-like way. Where instead of reacting with thoughts of violence or revenge we can instead focus on forgiveness and moving forward with how we understand God to be calling us to live resurrection faith. The faith that sees hope and life even in the most discouraging situations.

As for how that looks to those who were adamant about standing in line during orientation or any time anyone turns down what we as Christians have to offer; there is still a lot to learn about the ministry of rejection and how it might strengthen our ministry here at Church of the Good Shepherd. Perhaps we start by not giving up and not lingering on the hurt of rejection that wants to lash out.

And respect the decisions people make with grace and humility. Perhaps the ministry of rejection challenges us to measure success in new ways where meaningful encounters matter more than big numbers and a decision to give of time, talent and treasure is celebrated instead of worrying over budgets. Perhaps the ministry of rejection challenges us to remember what mattered to Jesus and what matters to us as followers of Christ whether we are directly connected to the campus or not, so that we can continue to grow together in living our mission of serving our unique community by offering God's love in our presence, hope, hospitality and welcome.