

A ROUGH CROWD
Luke 4:21-30

I grew up in a small East Texas town in the 1950's. That's about as close as one could get to the imaginary television world of "Happy Days" and "The Wonder Years". Our neighborhood school was Birdwell Elementary where my older brother and sister preceded me. In fact, because my brother Steve had most of the same teachers, I was often called by his name. Truth to be told, I still answer to the name "Steve".

I grew up riding my bicycle to school in that innocent age. So innocent that romance in our school was quite common. Everybody had a boyfriend and a girlfriend-often for weeks at a time. I, on the other hand, was essentially monogamous throughout my elementary career. There was only one girl for me-Susan Brelsford. By the fourth grade I experienced "young love". And I am not one to disparage that first taste of love for someone outside your own family. It was poignant and real for me, as real as it can be for any 10-year-old boy.

By the fifth grade we had embarked upon what amounted to an engagement, the elementary school version. We exchanged "disks", little silver pendants worn around your neck with your name on it. So Susan wore my disk and I wore hers proudly. As far as I was concerned, it might as well have been a diamond ring. By the end of our sixth grade, we had begun keeping a running tab on the number of times we kissed. That summer we had reached the high 900's. I am not making this up.

But then the seismic shift occurred. We entered Hogg Junior High School, a very different world from Birdwell Elementary. On our first day at school, we young seventh graders looked up anxiously at our eighth and ninth grade overlords. Susan Brelsford, on the other hand, took one look at an eighth grader named Eric Wilcox, a bronze god of immense athletic stature and good looks if there ever was one. And that was it! Within weeks she took my disk from around her neck and gave it back to me. She politely asked for her disk back. I was speechless.

It was for me "the day the music died," my first real taste of rejection, my initial foray into a world of a thousand hurts and disappointments. Looking back, every time I have since felt rejection, it reminds me acutely of the day Susan Brelsford "moved on", as they say.

Above the entire life of Jesus one could hang this banner, “He came to his own, and his own received him not.” Jesus was no stranger to rejection. It began at the beginning, even when he went to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He returns there in the power of the Spirit. John in the Jordan has baptized him and the Spirit has driven him into the wilderness to test his calling. Now he is ready to begin his public ministry in earnest. And so he takes his place in worship among his family, neighbors, and friends. He reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and makes this astonishing announcement, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus invites those who knew him best to believe that he is the bearer of good news to the poor, the one who will bring a new day to Israel. At first the response is positive, the congregation wondering at his gracious words. Matthew in telling the same story has the people ask, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” They are initially taken with his words and even his budding reputation as a miracle worker.

Then they start asking questions, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” Maybe a translation would be: “Who does he think he is anyway?” The mood shifts suddenly to doubt and incredulity. They must feel they have been duped, misled by this local boy with an inflated notion of his own importance. Here Mark and Matthew add this potent sentence, “And they took offense at him.”

Perhaps we can all feel for Jesus at this point. All too quickly Jesus becomes a victim of their blindness, even the blindness of those closest to him. Did anyone rush to Jesus’ defense? Did his parents or his siblings or his best friends rise to their feet and demand that they take Jesus seriously? Apparently not. There before the synagogue packed with family and friends, Jesus was left to twist slowly in the wind.

Anyone who has ever felt the sting of rejection can empathize with Jesus here. I am reminded of Kurt Vonnegut’s address to the graduating class of Bennington College in 1970. It began with these memorable lines, “I hope you will be very happy as members of the educated class in America. I myself have been rejected again and again.” Some of you know what it feels like to be rejected again and again by certain people and certain values in America. You only have to believe in something deeply, to stand for something publicly, to speak out honestly to understand that sting of rejection.

Sadly many of us simply wallow in the rejection. We become puppets in the hands of those who reject us or threaten to reject us. I have seen people live their whole lives striving fruitlessly for other people’s acceptance. Whether from a parent or a spouse or a child or a boss or even a whole culture, they long to hear these words, “I love you just the way you

are.” It is extraordinarily poignant to see people live as virtual slaves, subject to the whims and demands and threats of others.

At this point Jesus does not leave the synagogue whimpering in defeat. Rather Jesus immediately challenges their rejection. He rejects their desire to see a miracle. And then he adds sadly, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.” With that profound declaration, Jesus simply refuses to become a victim of their rejection. He takes the initiative and challenges their hardness of heart.

Then he even goes further and reminds his hometown synagogue of stories they have heard all their lives-how the prophet Elijah fed a woman from the land of Sidon and Elisha cleansed a leper from Syria. In other words, Jesus suggests that he will shake the dust of Nazareth off his feet and find those on the outside who will listen. Biblical scholars here remind us that Luke is preparing his readers for the church’s eventual mission to the Gentiles, those outsiders who will listen.

What is happening here is essential for our sanity and our spiritual lives. Some of us will never win over our hometown crowd. Some of us will never convince those we want so badly to have on our side. If Jesus could not, should you be surprised that you cannot either? “He came to his own and his own received him not.”

So Jesus did stand up to his friends and neighbors. But it turned them into a mob. They throw him out of the synagogue and lead him to the city’s edge where they try to throw him over a cliff. Now their anger has turned into a murderous rage. This was, as they say, a rough crowd. In fact it became a lynching party. Thankfully it was a low tech lynch mob, since Luke tells us that “passing through the midst of them, he went away.” Now that has to be something of a miracle in and of itself. They wanted a miracle; they got one, when Jesus slipped out of their grasp.

What’s instructive here is that you would imagine Jesus taking months to recover from such a brutal opening act. But Luke tells us in a rather matter of fact way that he then walked down to Capernaum, another town nearby, and went to worship in the synagogue there to teach. You would think he would avoid the synagogue after what he faced in Nazareth. No, he wiped the dust off his feet and ventured out to another venue. In fact, Luke never tells us if Jesus ever returned to his hometown. I rather doubt that he did. He moved on, he picked himself up, and he continued his ministry elsewhere.

I think there is something here for us. Living under the tyranny of rejection is no longer an option. Sometimes you simply have to walk away and set out for new shores. Rejection in one place may hopefully lead to

acceptance elsewhere. But I think there is even a deeper message here. Throughout his ministry, Jesus faced countless rejections. Indeed, his life would end atop a place of execution, the ultimate expression of rejection. But beneath it all, Jesus depended upon the unconditional love of God. A love that makes every form of rejection simply fade into shadows. There is a kind of acceptance, divine acceptance, that is not subject to the whims and caprice of human life. Here you will always be welcomed with these life-changing words, “You are loved just as you are.”

And thus Luke records Jesus’ dying words on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Jesus knew acceptance, real acceptance, in his Father’s love. He could commit his spirit with deep assurance into the loving arms of God. And so do we. Unconditional love and divine acceptance. In God’s love there is no rejection. That is the promise. And that is our hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.