

**Leaning on a Rejected Christ**  
**Reverend Tom Robinson**  
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I don't know if it's ever been tabulated in some kind of a research project, but I would be willing to guess that the two most difficult sermons to preach are the first one and the last one. For the former, the preacher is trying to impress the audience with their expertise and get their ministry off to a rousing start. For the latter, you are just trying to control all of the emotions of the moment and preach the Gospel.

This congregation has been especially difficult in that regard, in view of the wonderful and touching things that were said last week. I am deeply grateful for all of those words, and for all that was said and shared in between the service and the party. It reminded me of how grateful I am to have had the opportunity to share with you the good news of Jesus Christ. But either because of that or in spite of that, we would be justified in wondering about this good news that Jesus gives.

It is not always received as good news. As you can tell from these words of John's Gospel, not everyone receives these words as good news. He didn't meet their expectations. They didn't like what they heard him say, all of this talk about being the bread of life and how they would have to eat his flesh to be a part of him. As I mentioned before, the reason for the dismissal could have been because it makes following Jesus sound like cannibalism.

But maybe there is a deeper reason for their opposition, and their falling away. Maybe they really did hear what Jesus was telling them, that they could only receive new life by living in him, and by living in the special relationship with God through his death. This was not the first time that followers of Jesus fell away. And it wouldn't be the last.

Perhaps one of the things that the people felt was that Jesus didn't connect with them. It has been said of any pastorate - including this one - that 'they just didn't connect with me,' and of course that is probably true. You can't connect with everyone, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't make an effort. And yet Jesus is not concerned with how many people connect with him or not. He didn't distribute a survey at the end of this sermon to see who got it and who didn't. Jesus' Lordship is not up for debate or vote. He is to be followed, not asked if he meets my needs.

Given the context of this sermon, I can't help but wonder if there wasn't some other reason for their rejection. I wonder if maybe the people felt that Jesus didn't measure up to some other preacher they had known. Oh, he's not as good as so and so over in the next town, they might have said. Every preacher has to deal with that, and it is normal that they do. But I would be remiss if I didn't tell you as I'm heading out the door to just please give your next minister a chance. Let them be who they are. Let their family be who they are. As has been mentioned several times, I will not be returning here to do any worship services, communions,

baptisms, weddings or anything else. It is 550 miles, after all. But even if it wasn't, your next minister deserves the opportunity to be evaluated on their own merits, and I know that God has someone special in mind for this church, so they will have plenty of those.

Something else I wonder about is what did the authorities in Jerusalem have to say when they heard that so many people dropped away from Jesus' congregation. After all, that's how we evaluate people in the church. Did they send a select group down to check out this preacher who was turning people off, maybe offer him some counseling, give him a list of some good books to read so he could improve his people skills?

One of my favorite writers is a Southern Baptist named Reggie McNeal, and in his latest book, *Missional Renaissance*, he notes that for too long churches and pastors have been evaluated by the three B's: to put it crudely, these are bucks, butts and buildings. How much money are you taking in? How many people attend worship? What's the size of your physical plant, and when are going to start your next building campaign?

McNeal writes that the church needs to rewrite the scorecard it uses for ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He says that what needs to be different is recognizing the missional shifts that are going on. The first one is moving from an internal to an eternal ministry focus. The church needs to go out there, to see what God is up to in the wider community, and use its resources to connect with God in that work. That doesn't mean you will have more people walking in through the doors of this church, but that is because people have been released for mission. The work is out there, not necessarily in here. We still have things to do in this building, but the main focus needs to be in moving out in to the world with the good news of Jesus Christ.

The second missional shift is from program development to people development. You have heard me say for nine and a half years that this church is a program-sized church, not a pastor-sized church, and that means that there are some changes with how we do things. McNeal takes it farther by saying that, "We must change our ideas of what it means to develop a disciple, shifting from the emphasis from studying Jesus and all things spiritual in an environment protected from the world to following Jesus into the world to join him in his redemptive mission." Everyone finds Jesus differently, but as our Lord reminds us this morning it is God the Father who sends that person to Christ. Our task is to help find out what Jesus is already doing in their lives, and encourage, challenge and comfort them as they continue their journey.

The third missional shift is from church-based to kingdom-based leadership. What this means is that church growth is not our prime objective. It is expanding the Kingdom of God in this community in which we have been placed.

This is a hard teaching; who can follow it? But then they said the same thing about Jesus and his teaching, too. It's a lot easier to evaluate someone on bucks, butts and buildings than it is to check out how people's spiritual lives are going, and how they have taken the good news of Jesus Christ out into their worlds. And yet that is exactly what God is calling on us to

do. Not to take the easy road, the one that is easy to measure, especially when you are measuring someone else. But to embrace – and be embraced by – the call of God to go out into the world and live out Christ's good news.

As we come to the end of this pastoral ministry we do something special – a sacrament which celebrates beginnings. Baptism is a rite of initiation, a grafting onto the body of Christ for Kara Paige, as Mom and Dad and big sister and all the people of the church watch and wonder. It's a beginning for Kara Paige, but not just for her. When our children were born I noticed a really neat poster in the halls of St. Clair Hospital in Pittsburgh. It said, "Babies are God's promise that life goes on." Baptism, likewise, is God's promise that life goes on, for Kara Paige and for all of us. The waters of grace have touched us, and we have been made new.

Whether this ministry was able to touch you in a special way or if it just frustrated you, this sacrament is a sign of God's promise that life goes on. There will be a lot of work to do in the days ahead, but in the time of God's own choosing a new minister will come. My hopes and prayers for him or her, and all of you, is that you will continue to open yourselves up to the new thing God is calling you to do – even when that new thing is difficult. No – especially when that new thing is difficult. Because that may be a sign that that is what God most wants you to do. Amen.

Bible Text is John 6:58-69.

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