

So here we are, another Sunday where Jesus makes some BOLD statements that we are left to wrestle with and figure out.

Last week, Jesus talked about leaving our family and not even taking the time to bury our dead. This time around, he talks about shaking his followers shaking the dust off their feet when they are not accepted. This time around he's got this doozy of a one-liner: "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

I mean, Jesus doesn't usually mince words. He is honest and forthright and doesn't beat around the bush when he is trying to make a point. At the same time, we know that any one thing Jesus says isn't the whole story. Jesus was doing his ministry, travelling, preaching, teaching, healing, for a while. It would be foolish to think that we have everything he ever said or taught recorded. And it would be equally foolish to take any one sentence or phrase and take it at face value without holding it up against what else he says and what else scripture as a whole tells us about God.

Because verses like this can be used as weapons—and they often are.

They are verses used to exclude or dismiss or devalue others and their experiences. After all, if someone has rejected us and, in turn, rejected God, then it doesn't really matter how they feel or what they think. We can just dust our feet off and move on. Not only do we not need to care about their opinion, too often we feel like we don't need to care about them *at all*.

But when we commit to looking at the whole picture, to being willing to hold things in tension and in context, it becomes much harder to abuse and misuse Jesus' words. In this case, Jesus says, "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." And if we just isolate those words, yeah, that can feel pretty tough. It sounds final.

But what happens when we think about the stories in the Bible about all the times people rejected God?

Paul rejected Jesus. And not only rejected Jesus, but actively persecuted the people who chose to follow him after his resurrection. He was not looking to change, he was pretty content with his life.

Jonah was called by God to preach a prophetic word to the city of Nineveh to get them to repent. Not only did Jonah not go there to proclaim God's message, but he

got on a boat headed in the opposite direction and sought to get as far away as he possibly could.

And that doesn't even touch on the *whole people of Israel!* God's people continually reject God in the Bible. They build an idol to worship when they're wandering in the desert. They ignore God's call to care for the poor and vulnerable among them. They turn away from the prophets God sends.

And yet...we know that the stories don't end with these rejections, do they?

Paul was living his life, in the words of Acts "breathing fire" against the disciples, when God decides to change things around. Paul has his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and, we know, the rest is history. He is met by Ananias and offered words of grace. God sets him on a new path.

In the case of Jonah, God calls up a storm on the sea as Jonah is fleeing and Jonah asks to be thrown overboard to attempt to escape God even more. He is swallowed by a big fish, yet God makes sure he is safe and whole and, eventually, spit up on land. God didn't give up on Jonah and, in time, Jonah finally preached his prophetic words and the town of Nineveh immediately repented.

And there are God's chosen people, the people of Israel. Set apart, they mess up over and over again, rejecting the gifts and love God offers them. It eventually leads to their exile...but even that isn't the end. As we hear in this morning's reading from Isaiah, they *come back* from exile and it is better than they could have imagined:

For thus says the LORD:

I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
and dandled on her knees.

¹³As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.¹

And so, even as Jesus talks about rejection and wiping the dust off of feet, we hold the entire canon together to help us discern what is happening here.

We know, from what God has revealed in history and through scripture, that God doesn't ever allow our rejection to be the end of the story. *We* want it to be. Holding grudges, stopping up our own ears, closing our eyes—we're well versed in closing

doors and burning bridges. We do it protect ourselves.

And I want to be careful here because there are some reasons—good reasons!—why we might need to set up boundaries or keep ourselves apart from someone else. In cases of abuse or unrepentant hurtful behavior, God doesn't want us to continue being hurt. We don't have to allow ourselves to remain in situations that are harmful or dangerous. It is more than okay to make sure we are safe.

Rather, this way of thinking reminds us that God may choose to surprise us in the future...and that *God's* forgiveness and grace is always available even when we are unable ourselves to offer it. We don't need to expose ourselves to harm for someone to experience God's love.

When Jesus gives his instructions to the seventy, he tells them what to say and do, both in the communities that welcome them and in those that reject them. There was a commonality, though—did you catch it?

In both cases, Jesus advises them to tell the community, “the kingdom of God has come near.”

I find this really striking. The nearness of God's reign is not dependent on whether the people are receiving or rejecting it.

This is a comforting thought to me. When I think of faith, I think of something that ebbs and flows, shifts, and adjusts. It is something that can be so strong you feel like you can touch it, and so thin you are afraid it will blow away in the wind. I've experienced that gamut and I imagine you have, too.

And that's why I find Jesus' words so comforting. It reminds me that the kingdom of God, God's reign, comes close even when I'm struggling. Even when I might be prone to reject what God is trying to do...God comes close anyway.

Because God always has more to say, more to offer, more to transform in our lives and never accepts our rejection as the final word.

Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 66:12-13.