Sunday, July 10, 1983
HOW TO DEAL WITH REJECTION
Mark 6:1-6

Is there anyone here or anyone listening on the radio this morning who has not experiences the feeling of being rejected? Probably not! Rejection is a common human experience. And the feeling of being rejected by someone who is significant or important to us is especially painful. Rejection can destroy our feeling of self-worth. And the fear of rejection can cause us to do things we would not ordinarily do.

When we are young and want desperately to be accepted and liked by those of our own age, we often find ourselves going along with the crowd for fear of being rejected. Furthermore, rejection can cause us to be irritable and resentful. This temptation, of course, is not limited to young people.

Rejection can come to us in so many ways. When we were very young and our parents were busy and did not have time for us when we needed it most, we felt rejected. Remember in grade school when the teacher picked two people and asked each of them to choose others for his or her team, and you were one of the last ones chosen, or maybe not chosen at all, and because you were last, you were assigned to one team or the other? Or remember when everyone you knew was invited to a party and you did not get an invitation? Maybe there was a time when you were passed over for a raise or a promotion, and you felt rejected by your employer. People who go through the agony of divorce often feel rejected. Every time someone tells us that we didn't do it right, we feel rejected.

Sometimes, of course, it is simply our ideas or values or thoughts or actions that are being rejected. But there are occasions when we are rejected as a person. When that happens, our whole existence is questioned, and powerful emotions begin to work.

Rejection has often been used as a form of punishment. The Hebrews put criminals outside the gate, where they were cut off from association with other persons. Today, teachers sometimes put children outside the classroom door, or sometimes in the past had a child stand or sit in the corner all by himself. Parents sometimes punish children by sending them to their room. Sometimes people are placed in institutions and then in solitary confinement. Some groups have used the practice of "shunning," of not talking to someone, totally avoiding that person, as a form of punishment.

Rejection of another's ideas, thoughts, or contributions is common. Conflict arises because life is composed of a series of choices. When you embrace one value, you reject another. When you establish one set of goals, you give up others. Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters."

Jesus Christ personally experienced both kinds of rejection in his life — rejection of his ideas and thoughts, and rejection of himself as a person by others. The gospels tell us that once he began his ministry and came back to his own town of Nazareth, he was rejected, thrown out. When he asked some people to become his followers, they rejected him.

For a while Jesus' ministry attracted attention in Galilee. With time, however, its implications became obvious to the leadership of the nation who saw in him ideas which would change the whole society. At first they thought they could handle the conflict by ignoring it or posing

questions to Jesus. Failing at this, they resorted to intense techniques of intimidation, pressure, and rejection.

Later in his ministry, the gospel of Luke tells us that the people in a village of the Samaritans rejected him when he was on his way to Jerusalem, and his disciples became so upset, they wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy the village.

Then on Good Friday, when Pontius Pilate gave the crowd a choice of choosing Jesus or Barabbas to be set free, again Jesus was rejected and sent to be crucified.

What is it that makes rejection so painful? Not only does it threaten our self-worth, but it is also a form of death. Since life is built on relationships, to be rejected can cut off from relationships, cut off from others, is a temporary death. Broken relationships, whether they were ended by anger or self-righteous rejection, isolate us, and it is very painful.

How, then, do we handle rejection, and what can we learn from how Jesus dealt with it?

1. Often our first response to rejection is anxiety, because it threatens our sense of self-worth. Our mind is filled with fear, and so we often retaliate by rejecting the one who has rejected us. When threatened, we threaten back. But this doesn't solve the problem for us. It can, in the long run, only make us more lonely. Jesus would not let his disciples retaliate against those who rejected him. And he told them if they were rejected by people, they were simply to move on and leave the rejection behind.

2. A second response by some of us is to turn the experience inward, and thus some people tell themselves that they are worthless and deserve the rejection. They act like a turtle and withdraw into themselves. However, if the issue is not faced, it may affect behavior and personality for years.

We're all noticed, incidentally, that people are for some reason more convinced by fault-finding remarks than they are by complimentary ones. Maybe it's because we expect criticism and not compliments. Some people will not believe a compliment unless the person also criticizes them.

3. Another ineffective way of handling rejection is to try to escape through sickness, alcohol, or some other addiction or obsession. We try to cover up the rejection instead of dealing with it or admitting it.

These are all negative ways of dealing with rejection and are not much help. Now let's look at some positive ways of dealing with the rejection that comes to all of us.

First, it is important to learn to distinguish between actual rejection and that which we mistakenly interpret as rejection.

When we are very young, our power to observe develops faster than our power to interpret correctly. Because we have so little experience to draw on, it is not surprising that we often come to mistaken conclusions.

A man told me this story: "I still remember vividly the night my father's mother died and we went over to find the whole family in the throes of intense grief. I was eight or nine at the time, and I had never seen any of these adults cry or show such emotion, and frankly, I was

frightened. In the course of the evening, I remember asking my very favorite aunt a simple question, and she literally bit my head off. She told me in no uncertain tone to leave her alone and quit bothering her, and I was personally crushed. She had never treated me that way before, and in my childish way, I concluded she did not love me anymore and went off to weep like the others, but for a different reason. I felt totally rejected. Later I realized that I was a keen observer, but a poor interpreter. When I was old enough, I realized that her curtness had nothing to do with me or her feelings toward me, but had everything to do with the trauma of her own grief."

So it is that in learning to deal with rejection, we need to become good interpreters, as well as good observers. Sometimes what we first see as rejection is not rejection at all.

Secondly, we can help ourselves deal with rejection by realizing that some rejection is a normal part of everyday life. Throughout life we win some and we lose some. But there is a difference between losing and being a loser. Losing is a normal part of life, but being a loser is an attitude that causes us to give up in despair and hopelessness.

All of life is filled with decisions and choices, and once we make some ultimate choices and decisions, this will cause us to be rejected by some. This is what happened with Jesus. He accepted the fact that he would be rejected by some people. That was the risk he had to take. His convictions were more important than life itself.

What helped him the most, however, was the clearness of purpose in his life. Furthermore, he was sure of his self-worth, because he knew that God loved and cared for him. He did not make the mistake of trying to get his sense of self-worth primarily from others by always trying to please them or trying to earn it. His ultimate sense of self-worth came from God, and nothing could take that from him, not even death. He could be rejected by others, but God would never reject him.

For Jesus, God was not just to be found in a set of religious codes, laws, or practices. God was not just a historic reality or a distant deity, but a presence within him. Thus, he never felt rejected by God. This does not mean that he did not have his anxious moments. We are told that he prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. But in prayer he could once again get his purpose clear, face the emotional turmoil, and renew his confidence in God's faithfulness. He was not looking for magic, but for confirmation.

Thus, the way in which Jesus ultimately dealt with rejection was through his confidence in God's love and acceptance. He had already realized that choices have consequences. It is difficult to do anything without a trade-off. He knew how to get his priorities straight and then trust the consequences to the test of time and the grace of God. Sometimes there is no other way. God is the final judge of life. There is more to living than just always seeking the approval of others in order to bolster our own shaky opinion of ourselves.

In fact, we can too easily give in and live most of our lives trying to gain approval points from others. Then we begin to work excessively to gain the words, the glances, and the smiles that tell us we are okay. And when these don't come as often as we think they should, our self-worth falls and we tell ourselves we are rejected and no good.

Naturally, we all want to be approved and respected by others, but being obsessive about it and trying too hard to get approval at any cost can be very harmful. Soon we will find that we are living most of our lives doing nothing more than trying to gain other people's approval, and

we become followers of the crowd and nothing more. We become like a bouncing ball which other people are bouncing, and we pay the price in frustration, anger, and resentment, which in the long run may even cause more rejection. Furthermore, no matter how much we turn ourselves inside out to gain the approval of others, we always risk falling short of their expectations and not doing enough.

Remember, God always has the last and final word about our rejection, just as God had the last word about Jesus' rejection. God transformed the massive act of Jesus' rejection on the cross by an eternal affirmation that brings people all over the world to their knees in reverence and inspiration two thousand years later.

We will all have some rejection in this world. But no affirmation or approval is greater than knowing that God says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Those who rejected Jesus were rejected by history, which Jesus, who was rejected, has become the Savior for millions of us today.

In this world, all of us lose once in a while, and some of us lose more times that others, but that doesn't make us losers. Thanks be to God. Amen.