

does anything nice and kind for her."

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes...and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted...so stunned...so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I...I mean is it okay if I kind of... what I want to ask you is...is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the

cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!" She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left. When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Well, that's the kind of church that Jesus came to create!

God was in the world and it did not recognize Him. Jesus came to the world and it did not receive Him. Maybe rejection is simply we keep looking in the wrong places. Maybe we keep looking for Jesus in palaces, places of power, our religious constructs, and all along He is in this world.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was in prison and sick and you visited me.



TRINITY BAPTIST CHURCH
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

Trinity Baptist Church
4815 Six Forks Rd * Raleigh, NC 27609 * (919) 787-3740



TRINITY BAPTIST CHURCH
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

A Moment of Rejection

Isaiah 53 and Mark 15:1-5



Who has believed our message? and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?²He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, Nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him.³He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem.⁴Surely He took up our pain And bore our suffering, yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him, and afflicted.⁵But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, And by His wounds we are healed.

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.⁷He was oppressed and afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.

⁸By oppression and judgment He was taken away. Yet who of His generation protested? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people He was punished ⁹He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. ¹⁰Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand.

¹¹After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied;

By His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities.

¹²Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

These are the words concerning the suffering

servant from Isaiah 53. These are the words that point us to the Messiah that was to come. He would not be an earthly king, lifted high with praise but one who was lifted high on a cross. He would not be one crowned with accolades, but one crowned with thorns. He would not dwell in a palace of gold, but would have no place to lay His head and no home to call His own.

Listen to those words again:

He had not beauty or majesty that attracted to Him. He was despised and rejected by man. The term means that people were aloof when it came to Jesus. People showed contempt toward Him not only in His crucifixion but with their disregard. He was acquainted with sorrow and familiar with pain. His life was not lived removed from the ugliness and difficulty of life. He did not live somehow separated from the pain of others or His own. Everywhere He went He encountered the hurting, the grieving, the sick and the downtrodden. He was despised, that word again, and we held Him in low esteem. One commentary says of Jesus, no order of man had any esteem for Him. Not the teachers, not the leaders, not the powerful, not the religious or the wealthy. He was esteemed not.

He was like one whom people hide their faces. That is such an interesting phrase. It does not mean we looked away as though His appearance was difficult to gaze upon. It means we just did not care. We looked the other way. It can simply mean that men and women did not see Him. He was as the invisible ones whom we pass by everyday. He was another face in the crowd.

We have been following Jesus to the cross over this season of lent, and we have journeyed with Jesus to the garden and felt his pain as well as our own as we acknowledged that yes, life can be overwhelming. Last week we were reminded, all too well, that we have been betrayed and we betray. We affirmed that deep emotional cut of betrayal.

Today we take those next steps. Those steps that Jesus takes alone. Everyone has deserted Him.

Everyone has gone his or her own way. Those who made their hollow promises of even dying with Him, they are gone too. Those who had walked many a mile with Jesus cannot, will not and could not walk these steps.

Jesus has been arrested and taken first to the Chief Priests and Sanhedrin. Finally, they got what they wanted... they got Jesus. Those who had been plotting for sometime to kill Jesus finally were near the end of their goal. In the trial at the Sanhedrin, we are told they were looking for way to accuse Jesus with something that would lead to his death. There were those who stood up and gave testimony, although Mark says their testimonies did not agree. Throughout the accusations Jesus remains silent. Then in verse 61 the Chief Priests asks plainly are you the Christ, The Son of the Blessed One? Jesus answers I am... And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.

When they heard this they knew that this blasphemy could not go unpunished. How could this penniless son of a carpenter turned preacher be the Son of God. It was more than nonsense to these religious leaders it was blaspheming. It was too much. They could not just laugh it away. They all condemned Him to death and they blindfolded Him and struck Him with their fists and said Prophecy now. The guards, the Temple guards took Him and beat him.

They took him to Pilate for sentencing. Pilate was not a popular governor with the Jewish people or with Rome. He was sitting on a powder keg of a situation and to heighten the already tense times it was the Passover, so the streets of Jerusalem were filled with more people than normal and this was one of those times every year that nationalism was at a high peak. The people were all to aware that they were living under the rule of a foreign government. This was no time for a "king" to be coming to town.

When Pilate questions Jesus he asks a different question than the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin asked the religious question. Are you the Christ? Pilate is no religious man. Pilate is a political man. Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answer, "Yes, it is as you say." Jesus is somewhat ambiguous with His answer. If He had said "Yes" that would have been the end of the trial pure and simple. Pilate has no tolerance for anyone who is saying he is a king. Jesus' answer is ambiguous because He is the "King of the Jews" but not as Pilate thinks of a kingdom. Jesus says My kingdom is not of this world. The accusations continue and Pilate is amazed that Jesus offers no response.

Pilate determines to get off the hook and find a political solution to his political problem. He will let the people decide. What does he really care? Let's just get this over with and get on to more important matters. Mark says there was a tradition to release a prisoner this time of

year as a sign of benevolence by the Roman government. So, Pilate gives them the choice. He offers them the choice of Barabbas or Jesus.

Interestingly, Barabbas is not a personal name but a name of a patronymic to distinguish one man from another who had the same name. In many translations the name is Jesus Barabbas. So the choice is very clear. Do you want Jesus the King of the Jews or do you want Jesus Barabbas, Jesus the son of the father? How ironic it is. How unbelievable it is that the choice offered was Jesus who says He is King of the Jews or Jesus Barabbas, which means Jesus son of Abba. The one who was the only begotten, unique, eternal son of God, son of the Father, who uttered those intimate words "Our Father" and "Father Forgive Them" would even have this stolen from Him in the end. His very identity is actually stolen and offered to Barabbas. Barabbas was a known zealot revolutionary who had committed murder in the uprising.

When the choice came, the people riled up by the leaders yelled give us Barabbas. What shall I do with this Jesus the one you call king of the Jews? Crucify Him! Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate releases Barabbas and hands over Jesus to be flogged and crucified.

Here we have our moment of rejection. John writes these sad words in the beginning of his gospel:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. (John 1:10-11)

Through Jesus the world was made and for Jesus glory the world was made and yet, Jesus was in the world, but the world did not recognize Him. God made this world and revealed God's self in this world over and over again and yet, God's own creation did not recognize or acknowledge God. They turned their faces from God. Then the very sad thought, "He came to His own and His own received Him not." You know I have always read that to be the Jewish people rejecting Jesus as Messiah, but this time around I heard that differently. I did not see "those who rejected Him" but I saw myself. He came to me, the world, that which was His own and His own received Him not. God created us and was evident in this world and we did not recognize God. So, God came to us in Jesus and we did not receive Him but rejected Him.

Jesus knew rejection. This moment before Pilate is not the first time. Family rejected Him. His family wants Him to stop this preaching prophet nonsense and come home. They come to take charge of Him early in His ministry. His own community rejects Jesus. He comes to preach His first sermon in His home synagogue and when the message hits too close to home, they throw Him out of the place and take Him out to the edge of

the hill with the intent of killing Him. Yet, He walks through the crowd we are told. Disciples reject Him. After teaching about His body and His blood, some say this is too hard a teaching and they follow Him no more. In the moment of arrest, we are told that all deserted him into the night. Now the crowd, this unnamed mob as such shouts crucify Him.

He was despised and rejected.

The rejection continues. It continues just as it happened while Jesus walked this earth.

We find His rejection with those who think this Jesus talk is just nonsense. Why consider following a preacher/prophet from 2000 years ago? Enough is enough, they might say. It is too outlandish of a story.

We find the rejection of Jesus with those who choose power and wealth and their pursuit in our world. How hard it is to live in our American culture with our American dream and not let power and wealth take their place at the throne of our hearts. Yet, when we do not seek the way of the servant, and we let things of this world become more important than the things of heaven, there is rejection.

HE WAS IN THE WORLD, AND THOUGH THE WORLD WAS MADE THROUGH HIM, THE WORLD DID NOT RECOGNIZE HIM. HE CAME TO THAT WHICH WAS HIS OWN, BUT HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM. (JOHN 1:10-11)

We find rejection when we create our own Jesus. When we construct a Jesus of our own liking better than the one revealed in scripture, we practice rejection. When we place the Jesus of scripture against the Jesus who we have created in our own minds, we are much like Pilate looking from side to side and saying to ourselves, which Jesus will we choose?

However, I would say most of us are guilty of rejection by the simple thought of not recognizing Jesus who is right before us.

In his book The Kingdom of God Is a Party, Tony Campolo relates an experience he had late one night in Hawaii. He writes:

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What d'ya want?" I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. I'm a realist. I know that in the back room of that restaurant, donuts are probably dropped on the floor and kicked around. But when everything is out front where I could see it, I really would have appreciated it if he had used a pair of tongs and placed the donut on some wax paper.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday?'" "Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me

a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody