

A CHURCH FULL OF REJECTS

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.

Acts 15:1-19 NRSV

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

John 10:11-18 NRSV

I'm not sure if any of you are planning on going to Washington D.C. anytime soon, but if you are, I hope that you will visit the Smithsonian and look at an exhibit that's currently on display. Take plenty of pictures for me, because it's the sort of art that really captures my attention. The exhibit is by an American artist named Jean Shin, and she specializes in what's called "found art," which means taking every day objects, especially the kind that are thrown away as junk or trash, and somehow finding the beauty in them and making art out of them.

There was one particular part of her art installation that really just made me laugh as I read about it and looked at the few pictures I could find of it. She has gone to yard sales, garage sales and rummage sales and picked up old trophies. You know the kind of trophies I'm talking about because pretty much all of us have them in a box in our basement or attic somewhere: old bowling trophies, golf trophies, basketball trophies, track trophies. They are the things that you really aren't going to display anymore but you just can't throw away. You have no idea what to do with them, so you leave them for your heirs to dispose of after you die, because you just can't bring yourself to toss them out.

Shin took all these old trophies, hundreds of them, and displayed them in the Smithsonian, but she adapted them first. She took old bowling trophies and instead of the figure on top of them having a bowling ball, it now holds a baby stroller. She took old basketball trophies and instead of a basketball in the figure's hand, now there is a hammer. A soccer player's ball is replaced with a typewriter. A cheerleading trophy with pom-poms is changed to a figure passing out books. Shin says that her trophies are for all the people who are doing good, worthwhile things in their everyday lives but never have their efforts rewarded.¹

As I looked at a few pictures of this exhibit on the internet, I thought, "Now that is my kind of art!" I like the idea of taking something of little or no value and adapting it into something that has great value with a message capable of healing and helping people. I like it, because my understanding of the gospel is that we follow Jesus Christ who in his own way is "found art." This morning we read together in our Call to Worship a passage from 1 Peter. In it, there is a refrain used by the early Christians taken from one of the Psalms that says Jesus is "The stone that the builders rejected," but God has made him into the cornerstone, the essential piece of the entire structure.

In other words, God took one that was in the refuse pile known as the cross and took him and made him essential for building something amazing and wonderful. In our own ways each one of us is "found art." For God takes each one of us--even if we have been told that we have no value, even if we have been told that we are worthless, even if we have been rejected, discarded, thrown away, or made unwelcome—and makes us into something not only valuable but essential for the building up of God's work in our world. For me, this is a good illustration of how the artist who is God, takes each one of us, especially ones of us who have not been welcomed elsewhere, and not only brings us in and dusts us off, but makes us into works of art that are beautiful, meaningful, helpful, and healing.

I have shared before on many occasions at this church about my own faith journey. I feel the need to go back over it again, so I apologize for the repetition. I want to review my own journey with you, because my experience of being unwelcome in my own church tradition stands at the

heart of my understanding of the gospel. I grew up as a Southern Baptist minister's son, and although I'm grateful for much of my upbringing and who it helped me to be, when I felt my own calling towards ministry, I found myself wondering, "Can I even be a minister in this denomination, because my beliefs do not match what I'm seeing around me."

At the time I was getting ready to go to seminary, Southern Baptists were fighting over whether women were first or second class citizens. Not only was there the question of whether or not women could be ministers, but also whether women could do anything other than what their husbands would allow them to do. Southern Baptists weren't having too much debate over people who were gay or lesbian, because after all, they were going to hell anyway and they certainly were not welcome in our churches. There were endless debates about who were saints and who were sinners, and for most Southern Baptists, unless you voted a particular line politically, you were a sinner unwelcome at church.

I began to realize that my understanding of the gospel did not match what I was seeing in the churches around me. The gospel I knew spoke of a church that welcomes all people and a God who says you are welcome and you are of worth, no matter what other people have said to you. It was a crisis of faith for me to be called to be a minister when the church as I knew it would not welcome me. That crisis began a journey that led me first to graduate school then to working in one denomination and then making my way to St. Joseph, Missouri to work in a second denomination. My journey was in search of a church that would live out the Gospel that I had felt and experienced, a Gospel that presents a God who loves and welcomes everyone.

One of the many reasons that I felt attracted to First Christian Church was it seemed like a church full of rejects. Now I know what you are thinking. I've already had many of you ask, "Who are you calling a reject?" The answer is YOU; I'm calling YOU a reject, but don't worry, I'm one too. Of course, everything depends upon what you mean by reject; the meaning of the word depends on who has rejected you and why.

I believe in a Jesus who was rejected for speaking out for the lowest of the low, for being with the kind of people that good religious folks didn't want to be around. I believe that if we wish to call ourselves Christians, then we, like Christ, will make room for all sorts of people that good religious people don't want in their churches. Some of you have experienced what I have experienced; you have been in other churches where you have not felt welcome or felt you did not fit, so you found your way here. Some of you have always been here, but in your own way, you have learned what it is to welcome people. Through your empathy for them, you have learned what it is to be rejected.

I would like to offer a particular perspective on the two scripture passages read today. Each of them speaks of a church choosing to be inclusive. The Gospel took its shape in an era when Christianity was figuring out just exactly who and what it would be. It began as just another Jewish sect, another party within Judaism, distinct from others because its adherents believed Jesus was the Messiah. Then something strange began happening; as word of Jesus Christ began spreading beyond the realm of Judaism, there were all sorts of non-Jews who were hearing about Jesus and upon whom the Spirit of God descended. The Gentile believers in Jesus left the early church with a dilemma. Could this Jewish group of believers make room for Gentiles?

The passage from Acts tells of when the church was debating whether to include the Gentiles at all, and if so, under what conditions? Would this movement be for Jews only? If so, would these non-Jews need to become Jews to be in the group? Should they be circumcised? Should they follow the laws of Moses? What hoops would they have to jump through? The Spirit was at work among the Gentiles, so did that mean the Gentiles needed to change or that the church needed to accept them as they were?²

There were two streams of thought from scripture they could have pulled from. One was an exclusive understanding of God that said God only was interested in one group of people. The other stream of tradition involved other passages that spoke of God loving and caring for all nations, all people. They ended up deciding based on their experience of the Spirit of God. They saw God at work among people whom they thought God did not care about, and their understanding of God changed. This was not how God was supposed to work. God only worked with one group of people, one kind of people. Right? Their new experience of God's inclusive love led them to reconsider their own tradition. They looked back and chose those parts of scripture that point to a God's love of all people. They chose to be more than a movement made up of one kind of person; they chose to be a church for all people.

In the passage from John, there is one line in particular that grabs my attention. It is the verse where Jesus says, "I have other sheep not of this fold." Jesus was saying, "I have sheep in my flock who are outside of the Jewish pasture, and I'm going to be shepherd to all of them." Like the passage from Acts, it is a testimony to the decisions made by the early church to be inclusive and welcoming. Both passages stand as messages for our church today, whether we heed them or not. Where will we draw the boundaries of our pasture? Will we say that only certain types of sheep can be in this flock, and everybody on the other side of the fence is unwelcome? We have to ask ourselves whether the lines we draw are the same as the lines drawn by God? There's a danger here that by drawing our lines too short and making our fences too restrictive we may be the ones who end up on the outside looking in. We may fence ourselves right out of the Kingdom of God and miss out on what God is doing among people whom we consider unworthy of God's welcome.

One of my favorite authors is Anne Lamont, and there is one story she tells that has often come to my mind over the last two years. It's the story of when she became a Christian. She was raised in an agnostic, maybe even atheistic home and was what you would call a world class hippie, a drug addict, and an alcoholic. On a Sunday morning she was going to one of her favorite flea markets and she passed by a small African American church. She heard the church members singing, so she wandered up to the door and peeked in. She saw this small group of mainly older African American women singing gospel tunes, and she stood by the door listening, even though she was strung out and hung over.

Week by week she kept returning and peeking in the doorway. They would invite her in, but she would refuse. She just stood there until finally she moved an inch closer to the door. Inch by inch, week by week, until finally one Sunday she was standing inside the door frame. Then on another Sunday, she was inside the church sitting in one of their pews, weeping, praying for God to forgive her and change her life.

Lamott has become an author of novels and spiritual memoirs that have touched millions. I've thought about Anne Lamott whenever someone knocks on the doors of our downtown church. Sometimes the person knocking is strung out and sometimes he or she is hung over. Sometimes they show up on a Sunday morning. I have reminded myself that any one or all of these visitors could be another Ann Lamont. There could be a novel or a book inside of this person that would change my life and the lives of millions, but first they've got to find a community, a church that will welcome them.

A church is what Lamott found and it wasn't easy or quick. She was a drug addict and pretty soon, she was pregnant, but that church loved this strung out unwed mother and took her in. They loved her and her new baby. Her life was changed and I stand before you to share how I have been changed by what she's written. I'm grateful to the church that welcomed a reject on an ordinary Sunday morning.

I heard a great story this week on the public radio program, *This American Life*.³ The story was about a football coach at a Christian high school in Texas. His team played each year against another school made up entirely of juvenile delinquents. The kids were considered the worst of the worst. The coach knew from previous match-ups that no one came to cheer for this other team. The parents and families of these kids had given up on them long ago. No one showed up to cheer them on. So he went to the parents and the fans of his school's team and said, "I want to split you in half. I need half of you to volunteer to come to the game Friday night and cheer for the opposing team, because they have no one to cheer for them." He brought a list of the players' names and the parents and school boosters were asked to each pick a player to cheer for. So half of that coach's fans showed up at that week's game to cheer for the kids who had been written off, who had been told they were trash. They cheered for the rejects.

As the opposing team ran out, cheerleaders who had left their home side cheered for them. The cheerleaders formed a spirit line where the previously rejected kids would run out onto the field as their name was announced. People in the stands chanted their name. The program interviewed some of the kids who had never had anyone cheer them on or shout their name before. One said, "I felt like I had wings! People were chanting for me and cheering for me when I made a good play. No one has ever cheered for me."

I have spent my professional adult life, maybe my entire life looking for a church that is going to cheer on the rejects, the misfits, the cast-offs. I believe this church can be the church I and so many others have been looking for. I want you to believe it too.

Amen

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¹ You can find pictures of Shin's art and her explanation of it on-line at:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103674782>

² My understanding of Acts 15 and its relevance for the contemporary church is heavily indebted to that of Luke Timothy Johnson in his book, Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

³ I recommend highly listening to this episode of *This American Life*. I include only half of this thought-provoking story in my sermon: http://www.thislife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=1292