

"Evergreen Values: Acceptance"

Acts 13:42-52

Acceptance. I'm supposed to be preaching about acceptance today. I'm supposed to be preaching about how we welcome one another in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, how we receive and respect one another because we have been made one in the Spirit.

But I've been thinking and I've been reading my Bible, and I've realized that if we're going to talk about acceptance, we need to *first* talk about *rejection*.

Now I'm sure nobody *here* has ever been rejected before. I'm sure nobody *here* has ever had their job application stamped with a big fat NO. Or been left off that invite list. Or had their teenager refuse to speak with them for a week. Nobody in this room I'm sure.

But while *we* are all highly effective people who know the power of positive thinking, have gone from good to great and are getting our best lives now, the disciples weren't quite so lucky.

See in the Scripture we just read, we are thirteen chapters into the book of Acts, thirteen chapters into what life looks like for the people of God when the tomb is found empty, death has been defeated and the Holy Spirit is on the move.

But here's the thing: this life post-resurrection isn't necessarily going from glory to glory. Instead it's sort of hitting roadblock after roadblock. For example, the Spirit comes down... and the crowds mock the disciples as drunk. Then Peter is given

this amazing vision of the Gentiles being included in God's holy plan... and the other believers have to think about it for a while. And now here as Paul and Barnabas go around declaring the good news of forgiveness in Christ Jesus, we are told that "the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city" get so worked up by what the apostles are saying that they drive them out not just of the city, but of the entire region.

So much for winning friends and influencing people.

Roadblock, roadblock, roadblock. Yes, many people do accept the words of Paul and Barnabas, but it seems like for every one person who has accepted, there are ten who have rejected.

Rejection of Jesus is the great mystery Scriptures ponders time and time again. It's the great mystery of all of our lives. How is it possible that we would say "no" to perfect love and all-embracing grace? How is it possible that we could see God, not just hear about God, but *see God face-to-face*, and then reject God? It's inconceivable. And yet it happens every single day. Just last week, I read a book "The Invention of Wings," that laid bare just how deep our ability to reject God can go.

The book was about two girls in the Grimke household—one girl white and free, one girl black and enslaved—growing up in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina.

Now the Grimke household was a *very spiritual* household. Every morning everyone would gather for devotionals and every Sunday they would go to church—the owners sitting down in the pews while the slaves were up in the balconies. Well one morning a shoe comes flying over the balcony and hits a white person in the head. The minister stops what he's doing, points his spindly finger up at the balcony and says, "Slaves, I admonish you to be content with your lot, for it is the will of God! Your obedience is mandated by scripture. It is commanded by God through Moses. It is approved by Christ through his apostles, and upheld by his church. Take heed, then, and may God in his mercy grant that you will be humbled this day and return to your masters as faithful servants."

Now what in the world?!? Here is this pastor reading Scripture every day—and his congregation is reading Scripture every day—and what they come away with is not the love of God that overcomes all boundaries in Jesus Christ, but a picture of the world where God encourages obedience to a system of degradation and abuse?

I wish I could say, well this is just a piece of fiction. It didn't really happen like this. But it did. The book fictionalized and elaborated upon it, but it's a true story. Two of the Grimke daughters, horrified by the slavery they saw growing up, would become abolitionists, forbidden from ever going back to their hometown because of their rejection of the slave system.

Even if that minister didn't say those exact words, those words were said over and over in countless ways and in countless times by

Sunday school teachers and slave-traders, Christian mothers and church ministers. Christians in the south were in church in Sunday and buying slaves on Monday. Christians in the South could pick up their Bibles, read right through them and yet unwittingly reject the very Jesus they quoted.

Like the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, they could claim to know the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and yet completely miss the word that God had for them. As Romans says, "Though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but their foolish minds were darkened.

Claiming to worship the Lord and then rejecting the Lord's ways is no new thing. Right before the passage we read today, Acts says that, "the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize [Jesus] or understand the words of the prophets that are read *every Sabbath*." Every Sabbath the people were hearing the Word of God. Every Sabbath they were studying the Scriptures, learning all of the clues that would help them recognize the Messiah. And yet in one of the greatest mysteries of all time, they missed him. The God whose stories they had memorized. Whose words were hidden in their hearts. Whose temple they had built. When that God showed up they drove him out.

You know what that means? It means that we can get up at five every morning to read our Bibles for an hour—and it can be just words on a page that go in one ear and out the other. It means we can have perfect Sunday School or Bible study attendance and it can be just another of the pleasant hours in our week. It means we can be a great preachers and

faithful committee members and inspiring church leaders—devout women and leading men—and yet we can still miss Jesus who is standing right in front of us!

Christians reject Jesus over and over again in real life.

But now here's the amazing thing: we don't always miss him! See in the midst of all of this stumbling around and confusion over Jesus, there are some who Acts tells us accept the words of Paul and Barnabas with JOY.

It's the Gentiles. Many Jews and converts to Judaism have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but when the Gentiles hear that the doors to God have been opened also to them, the Bible says they were “glad and praised the word of the Lord.”

Now a refresher. I don't know about you, but I don't often toss around the word Gentile in conversation. In Hebrew the term is a goy.. A Gentile, a goy, is a non-Jew. It's not a derogatory terms, it's simply descriptive. There are Jews. And then there are not Jews who also known as the Gentiles.

But in the history of God with Israel, the Gentiles occupy a very specific spot. They were those who had been excluded from the covenant ever since God had called Abram way back in Genesis. Those who were seen as infidels and opposed to what God is doing in the world. Those who in fact it would have been against scriptural law for a Jew to even eat with. These are the people who Paul and Barnabas are telling everyone are accepted in Jesus. And these are the people who are understandably receiving the Gospel with JOY.

But here's the kicker. This is the heart of *everything*. This is the *Gospel*. And that is that we are the Gentiles. You and I aren't the Jews. Perhaps one or two of us have some Jewish ancestry, but I'm willing to bet that most of us in this room do not identify as Jewish.

Some of us are even gusty in our declarations of not being Jewish. Last week I preached at *Japanese Baptist Church*. They are naming and claiming that they're not Jewish! And it's not like “Queen Anne” Baptist is too far away from that. But what a joy. Recognizing that we're Gentiles means that we're declaring that we were the lucky ones who got into God's kingdom only by the grace of God. We are openly admitting that we're not the devout men and leading women but we're the ones the ones the devoutly leading leaders are shocked over! We are recognizing that we are not the ones down on the floor, but we're the ones up in the balcony. We're the ones amazed that God decided to make us who were not God's people, God's people.

We, here in this room, the Gentiles, the goyim, need to remember that we were the ones who were rejected. We need to remember that we were the ones deemed not appropriate to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We need to remember that we were the rejected, because when we remember that we can live out of our new identity as *accepted*.

Because that is what God has done in Jesus. God has brought us in. Accepted us. Just as we are. Not trying to make us Jews. Not trying to get us to be the perfect, chosen people. But loving us just for who we are.

If we can remember that, that we were adopted into God's kingdom by sheer grace, it will change how we do ministry.

Think about it: No longer are we the ones who get to argue about who gets in our front doors. Why? Because we ourselves were lucky to get in the front doors of God's kingdom.

It means that in our council meetings and in our Evergreen annual meetings, we can listen to one another. We can listen to one another because we are lucky ones listening to other lucky ones. We are recipients of grace listening to other recipients of grace. We are the ones who have been filled with the Spirit listening to others who have similarly been filled. We can accept one another because each one of us has been unexpectedly accepted by God.

Our acceptance of one another is based upon our acceptance by God. We love because He first loved us. We accept because we were first accepted.

Now that's not to say there is a place for a good argument in the church. But let's just make sure that we're arguing for what Paul and Barnabas argued for: the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins and grace and more grace! Paul and Barnabas tell the new believers "continue in grace." We continue in grace by not forgetting our story with God. We continue in grace by remembering that we were Gentiles. Japanese and Norwegian. Samoan and Nigerian. Nepalese and Brazilian. Gentiles all. A people formed by grace because God has been graciously enough to send the Holy Spirit even unto us.

A people whose life began in grace and

continues in grace. A people who can accept one another because we've been accepted ourselves. Gentiles. Accepted. Loved. Received. Amen. Glory to God whose salvation extends to the ends of the earth. Amen.