

First Christian Church
Omaha, NE
August 23, 2009
Rev. Robyn Fickes
You need a reject; You need a Zacchaues
Luke 19: 1-10

You need a reject Hmm... you need a reject? Well, I'm not sure what Ms. Manners would say about calling someone a reject, let alone saying we need someone who might even loosely fall within this category. The term rejects stirs up a real visceral reaction, a social no, no. I'm sure my mom wouldn't approve of this term. I don't know about you, but I don't want to think that people are rejects and then begin to say that I need them. Wouldn't needing them defeat the purpose in actually calling them a reject?

Perhaps an easier way of viewing this is if we peel this prickly title back just a little bit. Leonard Sweet's "with-nesnes" have taken us this far into our summer so I'm sure he has something important to say about this character in our lives. So let's take a peek; at first glance I have to begin thinking that yes, I do reject people. This is not the proudest moment in a pastor's life, nor is this the ringing call for inclusion that I'm supposed to resound within you with this sermon.

But as I begin peering into this withness, as Leonard Sweet invites us to,, I have to claim I do in fact reject people. I think of a story where I rejected someone I most certainly should not reject. I'm 17 and our new rock star of a choir director has decided to do something radical and open up one of the daily select chorus's rehearsal times to the community. As one of the leaders of the alto section I was out canvassing the city, putting up flyers, encouraging this true community effort. I was excited. And on the first day of this bridge building effort I step into the classroom only to be greeted by my grandmother in all her finest. Sitting smack dab in the middle of the soprano section, and waving wildly at me my grandmother is sporting a loafer on one foot and sneaker on the other. Her purple sweatpants are tightly tucked into her knee-high tube socks. As we start to sing her beautiful voice is drowned out by the sheer loudness of her hot pink sweatshirt and clashing red sweater – which is draped across her shoulders like a cape. I don't know who I wanted to be up a tree more – her or me!

This was not a proud moment for me, or for her. So as Ms. Manners would poo poo the poor title of "reject" I think the fashion police would reject my grandmother's sense of ...um ... expression. But I think that's exactly at the heart of this idea of the reject.

As my grandmother joyously rejected the social rules of fashion, the center stage reject of our biblical story also rejected the social mores of his time and seriously disgraced himself. Beyond the fact that Zacchaues was a deeply disliked person being the chief tax collector, his actions in this narrative were even more egregious.

A grown man running, and then climbing a tree is the equivalent of cleaning your fingernails at the dinner table or making change from the offering plate – these are just things you don't do. They're not only bad taste, but they make all of us incredibly uncomfortable. This is what rejects do – they skirt the edges of the rules we all follow and sometimes even enjoy thumbing their noses and watching us squirm in discomfort.

The challenge with accepting people whom we want desperately to reject is not always what they do, but the fact that we can't predict what they're going to do. We would feel comfortable in our justification of rejecting people who continually let us down or take advantage of others. Zacchaeus was just one of those folks. As a chief tax collector he not only worked for the Roman government, but was then also helping the Romans exploit this community by funneling their taxes to Rome and skimming some off the top for himself. The onlookers grumble because not only is Jesus, the one *they* were standing to greet, was talking to one they called a sinner, but one who also came before Jesus in such poor fashion of being up in a tree. In his sapped soaked cloak, leaf tangled beard, and branch scratched face Zacchaeus stood before Jesus and joyously sang his praises of being seen, accepted, and loved. In this moment of recognition by Jesus, Zacchaeus was finally able to reject the sins of his past in order to really give of himself.

It wasn't a matter of how much he offered,
but how he offered it.

It wasn't a matter of what he had done in the past,
but what he was willing to do from here on out.

Zacchaeus, short in stature, stood before Christ and showed us the Kingdom
of God accepts all people.

In this moment Zacchaeus was able to reject the strong desires we all have for greed, material comfort and instead happily climbed into communal care and loving relationships.

For you see, we don't just have a handful of rejects in our lives, but rather we have a whole list of actions, thoughts, and systems to reject. I imagine the onlookers of this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus grumbled because the one they thought they could write off was being seen – and in this action a mirror was set before them. In this interaction rather than seeing the Kingdom of God breaking forth into their presence, instead, the crowd saw their own rejection of a person. They saw the things within themselves that they didn't like and they saw the greater practices of their community that they disagreed with, but were too afraid to speak up. They so wished that Zacchaeus and everything they thought he represented would silently fade away and be cast out by their community. But unfortunately injustices in our midst don't just sink beyond our eyesight. We can, for a while, deem poor ways of treating others, or undesirable people as outcasts, but these things and issues have a way of calling us back to attention; and the bell ringers or horn blowers of injustice not only show us the outcasts, but they then become the rejects.

The line between a reject and an outcast is very, very blurry. The ways we label people ultimately explains how we treat them. When we label someone as an outcast, we no longer even see them. But those who are rejects just won't let us ignore them. They stand up and either irritate, or blare in our faces the things we don't really want to see. Sweet claims that rejects "mess illuminates our own."¹ And often times our reactions are harsher than just embarrassment or grumbling. In the latest issue of the Economist, one article tells the story of a woman who points out an injustice in a peaceful way. The reaction to this statement, however, is not very peaceful. The article states,

In some settings, light-green slacks would be merely a fashion crime. In Sudan they may actually be against the law. Lubna Hussein faces 40 lashes and an unlimited fine if she is convicted of being inappropriately dressed in public—for wearing those slacks. She was arrested a month ago, under Article 152 of Sudan's criminal law, which forbids "indecent clothing in public" without specifying exactly what that means.²

Ms. Hussein's green slacks earned her a title of reject, threat of 40 lashes, and stirred up the threat of women's rights. While I am not critiquing Islam or even the Sudanese government a violent reaction to something seemingly unthreatening is not all uncommon.

Our history is full of people who decided to reject things that keep us separated from one another. On February 1, 1960 students Ezell Blair, David Richmond, Frank McCain decided to no longer be outcasts and instead played the part of rejects and sat down at the lunch counter of the Greensboro NC, Woolworth's department store. Knowing they would not be served, these African American students silent sit in held a mirror up to us all. This simple act spurred young people all across the country to stand up for their own human dignity by sitting down at a simple lunch counter.

It isn't a matter of what they do,
but what their actions reveal to us.

It isn't a matter of what they are
but who we think they are.

These students, treated as second-class humans, sat down and showed us the table of God has more than enough stools for everyone.

¹ Sweet 147

² http://www.economist.com/world/mideast-africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14177575

People who play the role of reject help us see the things that we want to forget. These people show us that we should be rejecting the painful and broken realities of how we treat one another, rather than rejecting people.

We know that our history and communities are full of courageous people living the way that Christ shows us, to love one another, to see one another as neighbor. But it can be so very difficult. We have busy lives, families to love and support, and our own goals. But the Zacchaues story shows us that it is never too late to begin living as neighbor, rather than as rejects. In times of feeling overwhelmed by this calling I like to remember, and be encouraged by people who have in fact done this.

Delores Hureta, Californian schoolteacher and mother of 11, was tired of seeing her students come to school hungry. In 1962 she left the honorable profession of school teacher to help teach the parents of her children, poor farm workers, how to work together to receive a living wage by co-founding the United Farm Workers of America. Gathering these workers who were rejected and exploited, she helped them realize they were a community. Speaking with farm owners and food industry leaders while carrying and nursing her infant daughter she helped these business owners see that these workers were people with families.

It isn't only about accepting people,
but it is also about rejecting things that keep us from one another.
It isn't only about loving our neighbors,
but it is also about seeing everyone as neighbor
This woman, a community teacher, chose a unique path and showed us the
family of God includes all people.

These people that we call rejects thankfully show us that there is another way. There is another way to view them, but there is also another way to view our world and ourselves.

The story of Zaccheaus, the sinner, the short man, the social, economic, and ethical reject, reveals to us that it's not only never too late to climb into a tree to see God's vision for the world, but that the love of Christ will always extend an invitation to dwell within our house. Zaccheus was willing to endure public shame in order to see Christ, but instead, Christ saw him and the miracle of true friendship empowered him to grow in his love for others. As you search for your tree to climb, Christ comes to say, I'm going to your house *today*. The good news is that God is still working today – now is the time to look around and see what's going on. It's not about the position in which you stand right now, but how you look with your eyes. When even one person is offered dignity, forgiveness, affirmation, or hope that life can be different and then resolves to live by a new set of values, the kin-dom of God is at work. If we let them, these people whom we call rejects, can help us become better incarnations of Christ's vision for the world and image-bearers of the true kin-dom.

As the love of God is happening today, Sweet encourages us that now is the time for “our acts of worship to become less what they really are – sits of worship – and more what they profess to be: real acts of the apostles.”³ Worship here, love God, but also remember to take that from this place. Whether you reject people or feel rejected yourself, this love of Christ comes to us all no mater where we are. And from the places we sit or stand we learn,

It isn't only about loving Christ,
but it is also about loving one another.

Amen.

³ Sweet 152