

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 20, 2010 (Proper 7, Year C)*

Rejection stings. It comes in different forms: letters, in person, e-mail. But however it's delivered it's never fun – even if we know it's inevitable. This morning we hear the story of a man whose demons are driven out of him by Jesus. He sends them into a bunch of pigs who then run off a cliff and plunge to their death. When I first looked at this passage early in the week I couldn't get a ridiculous notion out of my head: that this was the original “swine flew.”

But after the demons are driven out, after the man returns to normal, and after the pigs fly, the man formerly possessed by demons begs Jesus to let him go with him. He practically has one foot in the disciples' boat when Jesus commands him to “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” The man's life has just been forever transformed, his shackles have literally been thrown off; he is ready to make a new start in a new place with a new faith. And Jesus turns him away.

It's not rejection, of course – that's not exactly Jesus' MO. But it must have felt that way. There's a fine line between being turned away and rejected and denied and being drawn into a new opportunity, a new hope, a new calling. The former demoniac had one idea of what the future would hold; Jesus had a conflicting vision. And comprehending the difference between the two is not always clear. A new opportunity is not always made manifest in the short term. Regardless of the eventual outcome, the initial rejection always stings. It feels personal; it attacks your self-worth; it undermines your confidence.

Which is something like what this man must have experienced. There was certainly much for him to want to leave behind. A former mad man who is suddenly cured would forever after be looked upon with suspicion. He had so terrorized his community that he had been bound with chains. You could envision the townspeople tiptoeing around him, nervously whispering to themselves, “What if he returns to his old ways?” Would you really want to invite this guy over to your house for dinner? What if he went nuts and destroyed all your good china?

The other reason he probably had no desire to return was that, in a sense, he had singlehandedly ruined the town's economy. The major source of income in this Gentile enclave was the raising of pigs. This was a job deemed ritually unclean for Jews – it was scandalous that Jesus and his disciples had even set foot in Gentile territory. But once Jesus drove the demons out of the man and into the herd of swine, they ran right off a cliff. And as the pigs plunged into the lake below, so went the livelihood of the swine herders. Thus making the healed demoniac *persona non grata* among his fellow Gentiles. He had an isolating and lonely existence ahead of him; at least as much so as when he had been possessed. A bit quieter perhaps, but no less isolating. It must have been awfully difficult to go back.

I don't subscribe to the "theology" that claims that "everything happens for a reason." I know it's a popular and comforting thing to say when something bad happens to a friend and, yes, there are times when this is absolutely true. Moments in our lives where the proverbial "one door opens when another door closes." But there are also moments when you simply hit a brick wall. Moments when you are ill-treated for no reason. Experiences that don't lead to better or greater things. Times when there is neither rhyme *nor* reason for something that happens. Moments when something occurs that is not "of God." And it takes prayerful discernment to know the difference.

The man had begged that he might "be with Jesus." And of course he was; just not in the way the man had envisioned. His call was not to follow Jesus physically but to proclaim him spiritually. And we hear that this is precisely what he did. Was he disappointed that things didn't turn out the way he had planned? Most assuredly. Again, the sting of rejection is painful. But he was called to serve God in a unique way, just as we all are. In this case something did happen for a reason – Jesus' rejection of this man's desire to follow him in the flesh led him to lead the life to which he was truly called.

Whether or not it's part of a larger calling, rejection is a part of life. If you haven't experienced significant rejection at some point, you probably haven't lived very long. Or you've lived an especially charmed life. Or you haven't spent much time truly living. Because opening yourself up to the possibility of rejection means making yourself vulnerable. If the newly healed man had just kept his head down and not dreamed of a new life with Jesus he wouldn't have been in a position to be rejected. But by being vulnerable and asking the question, Jesus drew him into a new way of life; even if it differed from his original vision. His calling was to witness to the power of Jesus among the Gentiles; it was to show that you could be in relationship with Jesus even without being in his physical presence; it was to demonstrate the universality of Christ's call. This man's entire life; his whole being became a witness to Jesus Christ. None of which could have been accomplished in close physical proximity to Jesus.

We face rejection in many ways: in relationships, in job searches, in college applications. Any writer is intimately familiar with rejection. And it always feels personal. It always feels like a rejection not of our work or some aspect of our qualifications but of ourselves; of our very being. And that hurts. It also stands in direct contrast to our relationship with God. God does not reject; God affirms. God welcomes us and invites us and forgives us and loves us. It's miraculous – this amazing grace. Something many in the ancient world and even today thought would only happen "when pigs fly." But it's simply the abounding and abiding nature of God.