

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 26, 2025
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Rejection is not Proof of Failure

Luke 4:16-30 (EHV)

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

²²They all spoke well of him and were impressed by the words of grace that came from his mouth. And they kept saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" ²³He told them, "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." ²⁴And he said, "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵But truly I tell you: There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. ²⁶Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸All those who were in the synagogue were filled with rage when they heard these things. ²⁹They got up and drove him out of the town. They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the middle of them and went on his way.

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the more than seven decades that Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church has existed, the pastors and members of this congregation have knocked on thousands of doors in our neighborhood. Most of those gospel invitations have been rejected. This congregation has sent postcards to tens of thousands of people in our area, inviting them to hear the good news that a Savior was born for them at a Christmas service or that Jesus rose for them at an Easter service. Most of these were likely thrown away with barely a glance. Far more than 99% of these invitations to join us in hearing the good news of Christ at this congregation were rejected. We've invited tens of thousands of our neighbors through social media advertisements and we certainly do not have thousands of people responding positively by join us in worship. The members of this congregation have invited countless numbers of family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors to see what Jesus has done for them over the past seven decades plus. If even 20% accepted your invitations, we would be sitting in a much larger sanctuary today because there would be so many people here after 70 plus years of such success.

If the church was a business, we would have to start examining our business model because so many are rejecting the gospel invitation. But we are not a business. We are the body of Christ, our head. And if Christ was rejected, we should not expect anything different. Rejection was not proof that Christ failed in his mission in any way. We must not take rejection of the gospel as proof of failure either.

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was

handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

This could have been a high point of Christ's early ministry. There was his baptism and temptation. He changed water into wine in Cana and had done other miracles in nearby Capernaum. Now he comes home. He was raised in Nazareth. People knew him and his mother Mary and who they thought was his father, Joseph. This up-and-coming rabbi who did miracles was back in the hometown and reading in the synagogue. This is exciting for everyone there. What will he say? Jesus reads from Isaiah about good news, freedom and the Lord's favor. So far, so good. And then he claims to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. This should be a moment of triumph. Shouts of joy and praise should erupt from those in the synagogue. The Messiah is here!

Jesus is the greatest missionary ever, better than Martin Luther who restored the gospel in Germany, Billy Graham who filled stadiums, Simon Peter who preached on the first Pentecost, or the apostle Paul whose mission journeys are recorded in Acts. Jesus, the best evangelist, has proclaimed the gospel and identified himself as the fulfillment, the promised Savior. Surely, everyone will believe in him. Surely, there will be great success this day!

Instead, we hear some polite doubts followed by violent rejection. First the polite doubts.

²²They all spoke well of him and were impressed by the words of grace that came from his mouth. And they kept saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

They kind of liked his words but they did not believe that he was the Savior. This kind of soft rejection of the gospel is still common. People might say things like, "I'm glad Jesus works for you, but that Jesus stuff isn't for me." Or "I like what Jesus say about loving others, but not what he says about being the Son of God." People may softly reject parts of the gospel of Christ but in rejecting part, you are rejecting the only gospel there is. Jesus could have left them in this polite rejection of his message, but he saw their hearts and exposed their sinful rejection of God's Word.

²³He told them, "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." ²⁴And he said, "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵But truly I tell you: There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. ²⁶Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸All those who were in the synagogue were filled with rage when they heard these things. ²⁹They got up and drove him out of the town. They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

This is the total, complete, and outward rejection of Jesus. They are all in a rage and attempt to execute him on the spot. Why? Because Jesus dared to expose their hard hearts that rejected his gospel invitation. He told them about times God rescued people who were not Jewish while the people of Israel were suffering. Those in the synagogue believed they were God's people because they were descendants of Abraham. Jesus was making it clear that the Savior came to save sinners of every ethnicity and descent. They didn't want a Savior from sin. They didn't want a

Savior who would give forgiveness, freedom, and the Lord's favor to foreigners. So, they tried to kill Jesus, further exposing their hate filled, sinful hearts.

Jesus did not fail even though he and the gospel he proclaimed was soundly rejected in Nazareth that day. He proclaimed the truth, exposed their need for the forgiveness of sins, and offered them the freedom from sins and the favor of the Lord through faith in him. He succeeded in every way. Their rejection does not diminish the gospel or Christ in any way.

Of course, we sometimes fail. Our hearts may at times be like those in the synagogue that day. It happens when we look at a person as unworthy of hearing the gospel invitation to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. We wouldn't want a person who talks like that, dresses like that, has this or that sin in their past, who comes from that kind of family, who worships a false god, and so on. Our sinful heart can make up all kinds of reason why we should not invite that kind of person to hear about the favor of the Lord delivered to sinners through Jesus Christ. And when we fail to proclaim Christ with our words and actions in life, we have failed. Forgive us Lord for our selfish and fearful hearts.

Jesus came to proclaim freedom from sin for your failures. He came to set us free from captivity to sin and the devil by taking the place of sinners under the wrath of God on the cross. The grace of God has been poured out on you and God wants his message of grace through Christ to be spread to all people. So, we will probably do more mass gospel invitations like door hangers, postcards, billboards, social media and so on. Instead of seeing the mass rejection as a sign of failure, we can rejoice in even one sinner who repents and receives the favor of God through faith in Christ. We will not give up on inviting friends and family, coworkers and neighbors to hear about the God who forgives sins through Jesus' blood even when many softly reject us by promising to come one day but never showing up and others not so kindly reject the invitation with harsh words. Invite the next person God puts into your life and don't give up on the gospel. God may bring that invitation you gave back to mind at the right time for the person who harshly rejected it once. Instead of dwelling on the rejection of the gospel, rejoice in the one person whose heart God converts to faith in Jesus. Rejoice in the one person who comes back to the faith after being away for decades. Rejoice in the one lost sheep who has been found through the good news that Jesus is their Savior.

Amen.