My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

My friend, Cheryl Lindsay, a fellow UCC preacher, looked at our scripture today in a way that I don’t know we’ve considered before. She wonders how Jesus dealt with rejection. Not the divine Jesus, who knew that his life was full of rejection, for that was central to his coming into the world. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus came into the world, “but the world did not recognize him, and that he came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him.”

How did the *human* Jesus deal with rejection? Let’s think beyond his words, whatever they were on those many occasions of rejection, many more than our Bible takes time to record. How do we think Jesus felt? Jesus had human emotions. He was angry confronting the money changers. He was indignant with his disciples when they did not show mercy to ones seeking him out. He wept when he learned that his friend Lazarus was dead. Hesitance and apprehension were within him in the Garden that last night as he prayed and his disciples slept, knowing that he would die the next day. So while we see Jesus’ emotions as he displays them outwardly, what do we imagine are his feelings on the inside?

Did Jesus ever have his feelings hurt?

We all have disappointments when our expectations are not met from our first years. Santa forgot to bring what we really wanted, but didn’t tell anyone, what we wanted for Christmas. A friend could not attend our birthday party. As we pointed out in our Message for All Ages, we’re sometimes picked last to participate or never given an opportunity for the leading role in the play. These things are unhappy events and circumstances, for sure; they are disappointments, sometimes big ones.

But disappointment is different than the soul-searing emotion that rejection entails. When those we are closest to seem to turn their backs on us, it does not just hurt our feelings. It brings into question our very soul’s purpose and how we rock in the world, doesn’t it? Can we discern disappointment versus rejection?

I remember doing a school project about family history and preparing to tell that story to my classmates; many of us do this as children. It was the first time I recall asking my parents any level of detail about our family history and who we were. They told me that they had always planned to have two boys, and so I naturally asked, why two? They didn’t hesitate to tell me that they had two boys to ensure that if the first one died there would be another to carry on the family name. Since that strange logic was presented to me 45 years ago, they have repeated it many times, in front of friends, neighbors, and whatever love interest I had at the time. And almost without exception, all who hear of this go away astonished.

But for me, it wasn’t astonishment that I felt at the time. It was rejection, a negation of my existence, and I came to know the realization that many kids in royal families experience: the heir and the spare. The oldest got all the attention and preparation; the youngest was, well, here also. Expectations fell hardest on my older brother, for sure. But I don’t know that anything was ever expected of me other than to not embarrass them.

Do we see the difference between disappointment and rejection now?

In our scripture today, Jesus is welcomed into the synagogue and he proclaims a message of liberation and hope. But then he also proclaims that he is the one fulfilling them. Suddenly, the folks who were all welcoming get in a foul mood. They can’t say that the Isaiah scroll isn’t true; they’ve heard the words before. But these folks never gave these words any currency, any legitimacy. Words for Jesus mean more. We know from the Gospel of John that he is the Word of God who came and walked among us. Jesus is the Word embodied and made flesh. Words have meaning, sure, but they also have being, they’re alive, like he is, they have breath, or ruach, we’ve talked about this, the ruach is the Holy Spirit of God moving across the deep at creation and in the wind around us each and every moment.

Words, for Jesus, create and destroy; they build up, and tear down; they change circumstances. They alter and transform lives. Words give life, and words destroy.

So the people heard him, and he says that since they heard the words of fulfillment, they’re now part of that new definition of Isaiah’s prophecy, the reconciliation and new reality. But then the crowd tries to take back their agency by the only means they can. They cannot un-hear the word of God. They take shots at Jesus’ credibility: “Is this not Joseph’s son?”, as if Jesus is not capable of being anything more than who they’ve known him to be.

Rejection aims to strip us of our dignity, diminish our worth, and evoke shame at the place of our deepest vulnerability—the natures of our creation. Our gender identity. Our sexual identity. Our skin color. Each of these things are immutable and when we are attacked at these places of vulnerability, they are an attack on our very humanity and our deepest soul.

The vision of heaven on earth was too big to grasp, too foreign to see for those folks that day in the synagogue. It jeopardized a social order and way of life that they had grown comfortable with. They heard the new Kingdom of God proclaimed. But they didn’t believe.

Too many of us want to be awed in the sanctuary, but when we’re actually presented with the fullness of the Kingdom of God and it’s implications for our lives, we, too, run Jesus out of our presence. Our food pantry is great, but what about a world without hunger or economic opportunity for all, isn’t that so much better?

Well, sure, but it’s not possible Pastor Mark. What I’ll say is that few of us ever try to proclaim and pursue such a thing. We are just too comfortable claiming Jesus for our own purposes, reciting the stuff that does nothing to challenge us to do more or convict us of not following. Jesus asks something of us that we simply don’t want to do most of the time.

Maybe we haven’t tried to pitch Jesus over a cliff. Maybe we just have some neighbors we refuse to love because they’re too different or difficult. We’re happy to proclaim eternal life, but fail to participate on earth, because heaven is so nebulous and far away. Maybe we’re just happy with a Sunday morning faith when Jesus calls us to follow every moment of every day of our lives.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

In my life story, not having any agency in my family was freeing in a way. Nothing was expected of me, and my life plan outside the family system meant little. I can’t imagine the pressure on my brother, it must have been immense. But then my mother died, and my brother after that. My father is an old man now and softened some, but he still does not apologize and also explains my life in terms of his disappointments.

And yet, I find inspiration in this Gospel story, because I see a willing people in that synagogue who are scared of a future that will not go according to the old rules, the expectations of their families and priests. Maybe they didn’t reject Jesus the person they knew as much as they rejected his message.

And so I cut my father some slack. He grew up in a world where infant mortality was real. His father died of a heart attack in 1936 when he was a young child. He had polio in 1944 when 21% of children who contracted it died, and many others ended up in wheelchairs for life in the days prior to a vaccine for polio. A close cousin was take by scarlet fever. Another died on Anzio beach. For an older generation, death was more commonplace, and it was a reality that had to be managed and dealt with. And that message is loud and clear sometimes. So while I reject his hurtful message, I do not reject him, for to do so would diminish my life. I will not inflict soul-searing wounds as long as I breathe. But I also will not pick up the shame others try and assign to me, because I am walking with and in the sight of God, forgiven for my shortcomings and sins, and trying every day to love and live better, however imperfectly.

Jesus did not stop his life or become destroyed by those who tried to shame him. There were setbacks for sure; but the triumph of the Gospel is that just as Jesus overcame rejection and moved forward, so can we.

And for that, thanks be to God, Amen.