

“... BUT YOU WERE NOT WILLING!”

Dear Friends in Christ,

The cover artwork on today's service folder is an often-used painting of Jesus gazing down on Jerusalem. Beneath the discerning eye of God's Son, Jerusalem was a naked city. Though to human view its sin disguised itself behind the cloak of righteousness, to God the garments of disguise were lifted away to reveal rejection, a willful rejection of its only hope for rescue. This was the reason for the painful expression of grief from the one who was the Hope of Jerusalem and all mankind, Jesus, the only-begotten Son of the Father. From Luke 13 we listen to verse 34:

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you,
how often I have longed to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"*

Rejection. While here on earth, Jesus was hated by the religious leaders of the day and he was rejected by his own people, the chosen nation of Israel. But this hatred and rejection were not unexpected. Seven hundred and fifty years before Jesus walked among us, Isaiah prophesied that he, the Messiah, would be "despised and rejected." (Isaiah 53:3). The fulfillment of this prophecy, the fact of Jesus' rejection, is recorded and described in all four gospels. For instance John 1:11 - *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* His own rejected him. His own hated him, despised him, rejected him. Rejection is the key concept for today's message.

Have you ever wondered why only a few people enter into eternal glory and why so many end up in eternal destruction? Have you ever wondered why, under equal conditions, some are saved and others are lost? The words of today's Gospel lesson are important in formulating a scriptural response to those questions.

When you think of Jesus expressing sorrow, you probably picture him at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus. There, the Bible tells us, "Jesus wept." Here is another example of Jesus expressing sorrow, but it's not for the loss of a friend, it's for the loss of a city and its inhabitants. It's for the loss of those who were his own.

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you,
how often I have longed to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"*

For a thousand years, Jerusalem had been a most favored city in a most favored land, the political and spiritual capital of the nation chosen to bear the Messiah, the Savior. It was raised to the status of a world power under King David and his son King Solomon. Jerusalem became the home of God's temple, a place of sacrifices, a place where God dwelt among his people. It was home to loyal kings and powerful prophets. Through its streets Jesus himself walked on many occasions.

Jerusalem's inhabitants were given uncountable opportunities by God himself. God sent prophet after prophet to Jerusalem, calling for repentance. As you saw with Jeremiah in today's Old Testament lesson, the prophets were not heeded, they were not listened to. They were beaten or stoned or killed time after time. Jerusalem had rejected God's messengers and in so doing, they had rejected God. "How often" - not just once but many times, consistently, persistently with malice & hatred.

*" . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings . . . "*

What a picture of loving concern and protection, a mother hen and her chicks. Years ago my grandfather told the story of when he was a boy, how the neighbors raised chickens in their back yard. They sold the eggs and occasionally sold the chickens. A portion of the henhouse was set apart as the brooder house, and, on cold winter nights the brooder house was kept warm with oil lamps, a fire hazard. Sure enough there was a fire in the brooder house and a portion of it burned. My grandfather described how two hens were found on their nests, dead from the smoke and the flames, but underneath them their chicks were found alive.

*" . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"*

You were not willing - REJECTION!! God's loving call, often repeated, to gather in the people, was resisted. God wanted them. They didn't want God. A Savior came to them. They rejected him. Their abundant opportunities only led to hardness and rejection. *" . . . you were not willing!"*

Can this be true? Can human beings RESIST the loving call of the Almighty God? Acts 7:51, the deacon Stephen said, *"You stiff-necked people . . . ! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"* Yes, it is clear from Scripture, we possess the ability, the awesome power, to resist the operation of divine grace through which God intends to produce faith in us. We can resist him. We can reject him. And that's why some are lost. *" . . . you were not willing!"*

It's not because God is unwilling to save everybody. Scripture testifies in verse after verse, Jesus here testifies with tears, God himself testifies by oath:

'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.' (Ezekiel 33:11 NIV).

1 Timothy 2:3-4 (NIV) *God...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

God wants all to be saved. But without God's intervention no one would be saved. The Bible tells us that *" . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* Romans 3:23 (NIV)

All have sinned and sinners deserve eternal condemnation from a just and holy God. (Romans 6:23). Without Jesus' intervention it would be worse for us than for chicks in a burning henhouse. Jesus came to absorb the smoke and flames of our punishment. He came to bear the load of our sin. He came to take our punishment on himself, brutal and gory as it was. He came to feel the awful blast of God's righteous wrath against our sin. God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus, his holy precious blood, to pay for

our sins. And now, through faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, your sins are paid in full. You have become God's child. You are saved.

It's that simple. God wants all to repent and turn to him. God calls us all in earnest. NOBODY IS PREDESTINED TO DAMNATION. Jesus died to pay the penalty for all sins, not just the sins of believers. Yet some resist. Now, be clear about this. The ability to resist the work of the Holy Spirit DOES NOT imply the ability to accept Jesus or make a decision for Christ. Conversion is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV).

So why are only some saved and others are lost? Our theologians put it this way.

1. The cause of conversion is God's gracious operation alone.
2. The cause of non-conversion is solely man's resistance against the operation of the Holy Spirit.
(Pieper, Frances. *Christian Dogmatics*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1950.)

Or as Jesus said, ". . . *but you were not willing!*" Yes, God desires the salvation of ALL, including those in whom he does not accomplish his will. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Jesus sorrows over rejection and resistance. He doesn't say, "I quit. Find yourself another savior. Instead he wept. He was filled with sorrow.

Jesus sorrows today over those who openly reject the Bible as the very Word of God; those who openly reject Jesus as True God and True Man; those who openly reject that his work has been completed and is sufficient; those who openly reject Jesus as the only way to salvation.

Now, what about you? Like the disciple Peter you may be quick to say, "Not me Lord!" "I'll never resist!" "I'll never reject!" But you need to realize resistance and rejection are not only found in unbelievers. Resistance and rejection are the product of that sinful nature that still adheres to us. You can resist God. You can reject his work in you ever so slightly, every time you knowingly sin against his will; every time you question his love for you and his plan for you; every time you doubt his Word; every time you doubt his promises; every time you doubt his teachings. Every time you show a lack of concern for preaching and his word, you are resisting him. And there he stands, lovingly willing to forgive you, lovingly willing to gather you back under his wings.

But there is a danger here. A little resisting here and there can be habit-forming. A little resisting not acknowledged, not confessed, not repented can grow to become resistance. And resistance can grow and eventually lead to rejection. And rejection can grow and eventually lead to hardening - hardening of the heart.

In the northern part of our country right now, in Minnesota or North Dakota or Wisconsin, you can't walk out into your back yard and dig a hole. You'd break your shovel before you'd break ground because the ground is frozen solid. Now it didn't get that way overnight. It took time. Starting in late fall, the cooler night air started to chill things. Then, with the shorter days of winter, with less and less sunlight for warmth, with longer and colder nights, with freezing rain and ice and snow, the ground gradually froze solid.

Rejection of Christ and resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit, if left to run their course, work the same way to gradually harden a heart. First the sinful nature, the Old Adam wins a battle or two against the New Adam, the New Creation in you. Maybe a sinful thought or sinful word becomes a pet sin, a repeated sin. Exposure to the cold philosophies of humanism which makes human beings and rational human thought of prime importance rather than the divine, and moral relativism which teaches that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is relative. What may be true to me may not be true to you. You decide. Exposure to the cold philosophies of humanism and moral relativism hasten the cooling process. Less and less contact with the enlightening, warming rays of God's Word quicken the process even more.

Soon there's attendance at fewer and fewer worship services and Bible studies. The sacrament is ignored. And slowly, ever so slowly, a person can gradually grow cold and slip away. If your family is like most families, you have a brother or sister, a mother or father, a son or daughter, an uncle or cousin, or maybe even a spouse who has gradually drifted away from the fold. Oh, they intend to get back into it someday. But the longer they stay away, the easier it gets to stay away. Religion becomes less and less important. The desire and the willingness to come back becomes less and less until that person becomes one of the unwilling. And the unwilling can become the lost and condemned. How? By rejection of Jesus and resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit. Yes, rejection and resistance can eventually lead to eternal condemnation. Rejection and resistance can lead to the Savior saying, "I longed to gather you in, but you were unwilling."

So what do we do with our loved ones who are among the unwilling? First of all, you can pray for them. You can pray for their return to the flock and you can tell them you are praying for their return. Remember, when people are suffering from hypothermia, when they've gotten lost on a hike and have been out in freezing temperatures all night, or when they've fallen through the ice on a pond or river, the rescuers work to raise the hypothermia victim's body temperature slowly, not all at once. They know not to apply direct heat to the exposure victim for quite a while. First get the hypothermia victim indoors, take off the wet clothing, cover the victim with blankets, share your body heat with the person and then, only then, introduce warm liquids and sources of warmth like a hot water bottle or a heating pad.

It's the same with our loved ones who are among the unwilling. Having all four Grace pastors show up on that person's doorstep with Bibles in hand might be a bit intimidating. It's probably better for you to begin to share the warmth of your faith, living as God's child, exhibiting your joy in the face of adversity; and love when people are unloving; and confidence in the face of death, expressing your genuine, heart-felt concern for them lovingly, using the Gospel to warm their heart and enlighten their mind. You can be better prepared for the task with regular attendance in worship, at Sunday School and Bible study, with daily devotions and, very importantly, regular attendance at the Lord's Supper.

Jesus would stop at nothing to win our salvation, but there is something that can stop Jesus. He can be stopped by those who reject him. The Holy Spirit's work can be resisted by those who are among the unwilling. May we never resist or reject our Savior. And may God use us to bring back our loved ones who have strayed. Amen.