

## Symbols and St. Nicholas

### Mark 6:1-13

Following these outrageous parables of Jesus, today's Gospel Lesson sounds like vanilla ice cream! Jesus is preaching in his home of origin in the synagogue and he and his message is scorned. Rejection seems to be the order of the day for Jesus' teaching among these spiritual rulers. It is easier to understand strangers disallowing the words of Jesus than it is his family and friends. When looking at salvation being from Jesus' family is no guarantee of acceptance.

Following this negative reception Jesus gives the commission to his disciples. Prior to the sending of the disciples he shares a warning: There will be bumps in the road. It should be no surprise to you that you will encounter rejection because of me. DUH! Be ready to dismiss them from your mind and go to the next village. In a word, Jesus is instructing his disciples that ministry is not for sissies.

As we walk with Jesus he is always lovingly correcting us, surprising us with how counter intuitive the Way of Faith is. It seems like Jesus butts heads with everyone and the cultural values of that day and ours.

Followers of 'The Way' gather weekly for worship because we were created to do so. We also assemble to hear these stories and study these texts, that we might understand with more clarity the difference between our way and 'The Way.'

At the Clergy Cluster I attend monthly in Chehalis, we were talking about what traumas each of us experienced in our first pastorates. One pastor told us about her trouble with Santa Claus. Her church had a tradition that on the second Sunday in December Santa would appear in worship. "*The kids love it,*" she was told, "*Everyone loves it.*"

She told the Ad Council that it was difficult enough to keep commercialism out of Christmas so it would be better not to let St. Nicholas into worship. Then she told us that she felt that the church was going to kill her over this!"

We all understood. Among other things, the church is here to keep clarifying “The Way.” We are forever struck by media messages that trump a worldview, a lifestyle, and a value system that are not “The Way.”

Jesus and his message were rejected because they run against the present world’s view, as they did in the past. Therefore, when we live and share our faith, it should not surprise us that we experience rejection too. If there is not discord or roughness in what we do for God, then we need to worry. Scripture encourages us to test the spirits because not all of them are the Holy Spirit.

Years ago I attended a conference for pastors. At it’s end, Steve Taylor, a Central American Pastor lead us in a worship service. Before the service began he gave us instructions. Basically he said that he hoped that we would take the American flag from the sanctuary. Most everyone was shocked. He went on to say that it would never happen in his church for law forbid any national or state flags to be flown in church.

He said because he was from Central America and he had learned the hard way the difference between God’s Way and the world’s way. We sat in uncomfortable silence and the service went on. Does the American flag have a place in the Christian sanctuary?

To believers symbolism is huge. We are encircled by symbols of our faith. These symbols publish our deepest commitments; they also form our deep commitments. Should a flag be in church? We hear a life event like Taylor’s and we think, “*He’s from Central America. We are different, we live in a democracy. Our country is good. We are innocent.*”

I pray that no one here would say that openly, because such sentiments are untrue. The United States has blood on its hands. The deaths of numberless African slaves, the slaughter of Native Americans, and others would arise and accuse us if we made such arrogant statements regarding our country. Being a student of history, I know our country has blood on its hands and is far from innocent.

Historically, we went 'awaring for the king. Now, we have war and killing for ourselves. The government is now our protector from birth to grave and the reason for being, the place we look to for salvation.

Just yesterday we celebrated the Fourth of July, the birth of our nation that has been good to so many. We celebrate the Declaration of Independence. But independence is not a Biblical word. Independence is what our government promises us, if we will just serve it.

The highest service we can give to our nation is to be its critic, a reminder that God, not nations, rules the world. That we have a loyalty that trumps all loyalties. Jesus Christ is Lord, and he will reign. Alleluia. Amen.