I’m sure that everyone here has experienced some form of rejection in life -- perhaps not so dramatic, but painful nonetheless. Those of us who didn’t grow up with athletic skills will remember the awkward moments before a neighborhood baseball game. Two team captains tossed the bat to one another as the group of potential players stood around them in a circle. The captains’ hands climbed up the bat and the one who had the last full grasp on the end of the bat was the first to select a teammate. Naturally, the captains chose the kid who was the best hitter. Anxiety rose as sides were chosen, and the circle got smaller as each captain called out another name of someone he wanted on his team. There were only two or three left. Two or three standing apart from the others. Two or three who knew inside that, if they were chosen at all, they were chosen reluctantly.

Those anxious moments colored and darkened the experience of childhood for many of us. An indelible impression was made. A feeling of rejection came early as a foretaste of a truth that each of us must confront. How many of our relationships and previous friendships have ended in rejection or disintegrated from lack of attention? How many times has a job search ended with the words: “Thanks, but you’re just not the person we’re looking for right now; maybe another time”? How many times at a meeting or planning session have our ideas been ignored or tossed off as insignificant? How many times have your own children given you the impression that you don’t count or that they don’t care -- about you? about your words? about your guidance?

For some people rejection seems to be their lot in life. In fact, that’s probably true for most of us at least some of the
time. It comes as no surprise that part of our Christian vocation inevitably finds us dealing with and living through rejection. We take our cue from Jesus himself who was rejected by the religious leaders of his day, who was abandoned by friends at the end, and who died alone and rejected outside the city gates between common thieves. One of the last utterances recorded in the gospels was Jesus’ cry to his heavenly Father: “Why have you abandoned me?”

The Word of God today paints a picture of a rejected world: crops that fail, grapes that grow sour, vines that are choked by briars and thorns, a fertile field that goes to ruin, tenant farmers who neglect the crops. The gospel message today is anything but consoling. However, it does ring true to so much of our experience. It reflects what many of us go through each day -- struggles within and without, the desire for acceptance and belonging.

Unlike a plant or vine, however, which can be torn up and replanted, this is the only life we have, the only field to harvest. The property owner -- our farmer-God who has leased this land, this life, to us -- will not transport us to another field. He has put us here and here we grow or here we wither. And for all the apparent destruction we experience and for all the rejection that might come our way, God calls us his “cherished plant.” For all the crooked branches and dried-up leaves of our lives, God says: “You are valuable; I care for you!” In spite of all our weakness, God says: “You are loved!”

This is the message that the son tried to take to the tenant farmers who rejected and killed him. He was trying to tell them about this God who had fallen so hopelessly in love with his people that he would never give up on them. He wanted to tell them about a king-God who threw a marvelous banquet for people who didn’t have such a good reputation. He wanted to tell them about a housewife-God who swept the floor clean until she found the one lost coin. He wanted to tell them about a shepherd-God who cared so much that he left the ninety-nine and went out in search of the one lost sheep until he found him and returned him to the fold. He wanted to tell them about the father-God who outrageously spoiled the prodigal son and then opened his arms to him after the son messed up his whole life. He wanted to tell them about the mother-God who, like a hen, opens wide her wings to gather the entire brood. He wanted to tell them about the farmer-God who will see to it that his field will yield a rich harvest.

You would think that God is blind, but then so is love, we say. God holds each of us from eternity and calls us by name, not because we are good or because we do good things that God needs done. Long before sin or virtue entered the picture, God loved us just for being us. God loved the very thought of us. And God called us into life to make that loving thought real. So just being alive each moment is proof of how wonderful we are in the sight of God.
Each beat of our pulse tells us of God’s continuing love pulsing through us. We are God’s “cherished plant.” We are the beloved of God.

St. Paul offers us some important advice in his letter to the community at Philippi. He writes: “Dismiss all anxiety from your minds!” That’s exactly what we need to do – especially during these anxious and troubling times of senseless killing, inept leadership and the unpredictable and often destructive ways of Nature. We can start over again and be renewed in all our efforts every time we open our hearts to the living and loving God. We can relax in the Lord, knowing that God’s peace will come to us as we trust and hope. In our prayer when we gather wholeheartedly at the eucharist; in all our efforts to live honestly and decently; in the encouragement we offer to each other when energies are low or spirits are weakened; even when our best just doesn’t seem good enough, God will help us to see and hear again the Lord’s rich plan for each one of us -- the story of God’s love working in our lives.

Out of our struggles and even our failures, we will experience God’s peace and hear the Lord’s call to begin trusting again that the owner of the vineyard will plant a rich new harvest. God’s love is at work: clearing the stones, digging the soil, pruning the vines, watering the new growth. In the Spirit we know what it means to be affirmed and accepted by God, and to live -- no longer for ourselves, but for the Reign of God.

Cardinal John Henry Newman was the driving force behind the Oxford Movement in England in the late nineteenth century. He helped to provide a bridge between medieval and modern spirituality, encouraging a life of intimate union with God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Convinced of the power of the Spirit’s work even in a field overrun with weeds and in a skeptical world that rejected Christ, Newman once penned a reflection on the uniqueness of each of us in God’s eyes. Let me close with Newman’s words:

God beholds you..... He calls you by your name. He sees you and understands you as He made you.
He knows what is in you, all your peculiar feelings and thoughts, your dispositions and likings, your strengths and weakness.
He views you in your day of rejoicing and in your day of sorrow.
He sympathizes in your hopes and your temptations.
He interests Himself in all your anxieties and remembrances, all the risings and fallings of your spirit.
He encompasses you round and bears you in his arms...
He notes your very countenance, whether smiling or in tears...
He looks tenderly upon you...
He hears your voice, the beating of your heart and your very breathing.
You do not love yourself better than God loves you.
You cannot shrink from pain more than God dislikes your bearing it.
And, if he puts it on you, it is as you will put it on yourself -- if you are wise -- for greater good afterward.

May our fidelity bring a rich harvest, and may we experience each day the power of the Holy Spirit and the loving acceptance of God.

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