

Luke 22:54-62
In the Face of Denial, Forgiveness
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3-16-14

I invite you this morning to reach for a Bible, either the red one in the pew rack in front of you or the one you brought with you, and turn with me to the gospel of Luke chapter 22. If you are following along in the red Bibles we've made available, it can be found on page 81 of the New Testament. As a sign of our honor and reverence toward the authority of God's Word, I invite you to stand with me as I read beginning at verse 54. And when I'm finished reading, I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it to be true, you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God." Listen carefully; you're reading God's Holy Word.

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance; and when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a maid, seeing him as he sat in the light and gazing at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." And a little later some one else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

This is the word of the Lord. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these Scriptures inspire them now in our hearing, as well. Amen, and you can be seated.

There are two trials that are happening simultaneously, one inside the home of the high priest. There, Jesus is being questioned and condemned by the leaders of the Jewish Council. But there is a very different trial taking place just outside their door in the courtyard. You see, in Jerusalem, the homes of the wealthy were situated around a courtyard where people could gather.

But this night, with the crowd gathered there in the courtyard, another trial is about to take place. Peter is called out of the shadows to take the stand under the light of campfires. Peter undergoes a trial by a few young women and some bystanders. You see, Peter followed at a distance, just close enough to be within earshot of the home where Jesus stood trial, and what he thought was just far enough to remain anonymous. Peter, it seems, wanted to save Jesus from making a mistake.

Have you ever tried to save Jesus from making a mistake? Maybe there was someone near to you who was near death, or on the verge of losing their job, and you prayed

earnestly and forcefully for God to intervene. “Jesus, this is something that you can do something about, go ahead show ‘em. You don’t have to lose face by subjecting yourself to this scorn and ridicule. Show ‘em Jesus.” Peter was ashamed that Jesus was subjecting himself to the accusations of the leaders. Peter thought he knew better than Jesus, he thought he knew what was best for Jesus, and that certainly was not to go the way of the cross. Peter was trying to muster his own strength, rather than trusting in God to supply the strength he needed to face the trial.

When push comes to shove, do we try to help Jesus save face and protect him? Are we ashamed of where Jesus calls us to go? If so, it might be because we do not trust in God’s strength.

When I was a first year student at St. Olaf College, I was walking with my teammates from baseball practice one afternoon. And as we entered into the cafeteria, we passed by a table, the guy who was sitting at the table was promoting a new small group Bible study he was starting. I recognized him. He was a guy who lived on my floor and we had talked a few times and had always had really pleasant experiences. But as we approached the table, I heard the guys I was walking with make derisive comments under their breath, poking fun at this guy for promoting the group and being bold about his faith. I remember as I walked past making eye contact with this guy and the look on his face, a look that said, “This is not you.”

Secretly, I really admired the courage this guy had, but I was ashamed for him because he was subjecting himself to the suspicious looks, the subtle jokes, the embarrassment of others. Secretly, I was trying to protect him from what he was doing.

Jesus found himself in a position of helplessness and vulnerability. “This is not where the Son of God should be right now,” Peter might have thought. We fight so hard to protect our Jesus. We pray and argue with him to save the day because we know what he can do and should do. And we are so dedicated, that if Jesus doesn’t pull through as the hero, we try to take over and protect him, or worse, be the hero for him. If Jesus won’t fix our kids or our spouse, then we will do it for him. If Jesus won’t give us success at work, we’ll get it on our own even if we have to pick up a sword. If Jesus won’t give us our dreams, we’ll make them happen for him.

And this is the first point I want to make: Peter’s sin and shortcoming is not that he is a coward. He has already proved that he would stand and defend Jesus with his sword. Peter’s near-fatal flaw is that he won’t accept what it truly means to follow Jesus. You see, he wants Jesus, in his power, his wisdom, in his compassion and love. But here in the courtyard, dimly lit by flickering campfire, Peter slinks into the shadows of denial. Seeing Jesus humbled and brought into the High Priest’s house, he must have felt sorrow.

“Hey, weren’t you with Jesus? Yeah, you’re one of them.”

“Who me? No, no, you’ve got the wrong guy. It was the guy with the beard.”

Peter feels sorry for what Jesus is going through, but not genuine sorry. What Peter feels is the sting of his pride wounded, his self-image tarnished. Things didn't go the way he wanted and he is distraught. "I don't know what you're doing Jesus, but this certainly isn't how it's supposed to go." So in a moment of wounded pride, when he's asked, "Are you one of his?" he responds, "You've got the wrong guy."

Peter's denial was his admission that's he's not actually a follower of Jesus. He's a follower of *his image* of Jesus. He's a follower of who he wants Jesus to be. He's a follower of the Jesus of his own making. He trusts in the Jesus who goes along with his plan, that follows his agenda, who blesses all the little plans he makes. And this is not actually who Jesus is at all. This is not discipleship at all.

This is a remarkably common way of looking at Jesus. He's the Super Bowl Jesus, the Election time and Business Meeting Jesus, the one we go to when we need him to do us a solid. What Peter is confronted with is the stark reality that the one who he has followed, at least in his own mind, is not at all who Jesus really is. The real Jesus is one who invited him to leave everything, which Peter did, and follow him, which Peter did, to heal people and cast out demons, which Peter did and will do, to go to the orphans and widows, the poor and marginalized, which Peter will do, AND the one who invites him to follow him to the cross, to the place of self-sacrifice and suffering, the place of weakness and vulnerability. This Peter just can't abide.

Are you a disciple of Jesus? Are you? See the painting up on the screen? It's a painting from the 1600s by the famous Italian Painter Caravaggio, called The Denial of St Peter. In the painting, you see three fingers pointing at Peter, two from the woman and bystander and the other is Peter's, and those fingers ask the question, "Are you a disciple of Jesus?" When push comes to shove, are we willing to follow this Jesus?

The question simply will not go away. It just keeps returning. Are you a disciple of Jesus? Are you one of his? You will hear it in a business meeting at work, when you are interrupted at home, when you sit down with your checkbook to decide what you will do with your money, and when you read the paper — skimming over the articles that describe the pathos of the world. Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ? We would love to say "yes" to that question, if only Jesus would forget about this cross and get back to the business of making our dreams come true. But he won't. So again we hear the question: Are you still going to follow Jesus? Are you going to follow to the cross? Are you going to follow even if it means your dreams for what he will do in your life may go unmet?

Because let me tell you that the most heroic form of discipleship is allowing Jesus to lead us where he is actually going. And sometimes being a disciple of Jesus feels rather helpless, a little bit like being in a free fall, and trusting that God is going to be there to catch us.

There is a beautiful thing that happens in verse 60. When Peter denies Jesus for the third time and that rooster crows it is like a call to worship, a call to true trust, a call to repentance, a call to let Jesus be Jesus, and let him walk where only he can walk... in that

moment, do you see what happens? It is Jesus who turns and looks at Peter. Jesus looks at Peter.

Sometimes in life, all it takes is a look. Husbands, you know exactly what I mean. One look can say everything. One look tore Peter's heart in two, one look took him from a man with wounded pride to a man who knew his true brokenness, a man who realized he wasn't actually following Jesus the man, but Jesus the dream. One look, not a thundering chastisement, not a sharp-tongued rebuke, a look from Jesus said everything, and Peter wept bitterly in shame.

But it was looking into the face of Jesus and seeing his own denial, his own sin, that enabled Peter to begin to experience the beauty of God's grace. You see, if we continue to slink around in the shadows of pride and self-justification, we will never experience true sorrow over the penetrating gaze of Jesus.

But in the same way that looking into the face of Jesus rent Peter in two, it is also the face of Jesus, on his way to the cross, that is the face of victorious defeat. There is only one way that God is able to completely remove and fully restore broken and sinful humanity, and that is by offering himself as an atoning sacrifice. You can't do it for him, and you certainly can't do it yourself. That means you no longer have to justify yourself, you no longer have to protect Jesus from the cross, because it's in the gaze of Jesus from the cross where Peter will see the face of complete forgiveness and unshakable love.

It's in the moment where we look to Jesus through the truth of our own sinfulness that we realize that the Savior is already looking at us. The face Peter saw looking at him was not the face of condemnation, it was the face of forgiveness, the face of compassion, the face of grace.

So it's time to stop protecting Jesus from the cross, it's time to stop trying to keep Jesus from making a mistake, it's time to stop thinking about your dreams for God, and to start thinking about God's dreams for you. It's time to stop trying so hard to make things happen, and to start watching what God is making happen around you. It's time to stop clinging to old things and open your hands so you can receive the new things. It's time to make some changes. It's time to be a disciple, and it's time to look up and see Jesus, let him forgive you, and then get back to the business of being a disciple.

No more lugging around that guilt that you've been carrying around with. Forgive yourself, because God already has. Now it's up to you. Amen.