

March 1 – Second Sunday in Lent

Denial – Living Unfaithfully

Mark 14:27-31, 66-72

Today we begin a four week series on the book, “Our Common Sins.” The premise behind the book is that the sins we see playing out in the lives of the disciples and others connected to the last hours of Jesus’ life are common to us all. We have denied, betrayed and all the rest. But also there is redemption. I hope you take time to be a part of one of our small groups studying this book. If not, there are copies of the book available after church that you can purchase to read for your own study.

We want to believe that somehow or other the disciples were better than we at being faithful. After all, by the time we get to the last days of Jesus’ life many of them had been with him around three years. During that time they had listened to Jesus on a daily basis and saw the many miracles he had performed. Also, Jesus had chosen them, not the other way around. All of this, we want to believe, would mean that they were more faithful than individuals like us. But when you examine the lives of the disciples you see people just like us. We come to realize that their reactions during these last hours of Jesus’ life would likely be similar to how we might react. Their sin is ours. That is why it hurts so much.

Today we focus on Peter. When Jesus called him to leave his nets and follow he had been known as Simon. Jesus renamed him, not an unusual occurrence at this time, Peter the rock. You wonder if Peter laughed inside when he heard the name. He knew his volatility. He knew his personality. I am sure he felt anything but rocklike. Yet he tried to live into his name. When Jesus talks at their last meal together about how they all are going to betray him Peter says, “Not me!” He was trying to be that rock saying, “depend on me.” We can imagine what was going through Peter’s mind when Jesus tells him that before the rooster crows twice in the morning he would deny him three times. I am guessing that thoughts like, “I’ll show him” were Peter’s thoughts.

We heard in the scriptures what happened. Peter follows the soldiers to the courtyard of the high priest to find out what was going to happen to Jesus. They all

knew it wasn't going to be good. They were hoping, I am sure, that Jesus would get off with a flogging but all knew that he might be executed. A slave girl of the high priest sees him and recognizes him for a follower. When she proclaims to all that he was a disciple, Peter denies it. His rock solid resolve had crumbled. All of a sudden his life was on the line and he no longer felt brave or bold. Peter was smart enough to realize that hanging around the fire with soldiers nearby was not a good thing so he leaves and heads to the outer courtyard. This was an area beyond the walls of the house but still a part of the property. It was where merchants would come with their wares to sell to the household. It says the rooster crowed. Do you think Peter even heard it? We hope not because it would make it easier to explain what happens next. But since it is mentioned, and we must believe that the basis of this story is the recollections of Peter himself, that he did hear it. He probably remembered what Jesus had said. I am sure that he decided that he would not make the mistake he had made the first time. I think he was probably planning to stand in the shadows where he would not be seen. Then no one would ask him a question. But the servant girl seeing him go out follows and points him out to others hanging around the gate waiting to see what would happen to Jesus. I am sure Peter wished that she would leave him alone. All eyes turn towards him and he says again that he didn't know Jesus. Was there a twinge of guilty conscience? Probably. But now he had been signaled out and those nearby noticed in his denial the unmistakable accent of one who comes from the region of Galilee, from where Jesus had come. They do not believe Peter and so Peter, to prove to them that he couldn't be a follower of one like Jesus, unleashes a string of profanity that only a sailor or fisherman would know. And then the rooster crows again, he remembers and he breaks down sobbing. At this moment his name Peter seems a mockery. He is the denier, the faithless one. I am sure he feels like he is beyond redemption.

This is where the story of Peter becomes challenging. There have been those times in our lives when we have denied that we know or that we love Jesus. Not maybe in the dramatic fashion of Peter but we know we have done this. Let me give you a couple of personal examples and you can think of your own stories. I was coming back from a meeting. It had been three very long days. I was exhausted. As I settled myself into my seat on the plane a woman sat down beside me. She looked like one of those

who would love to have a long chat about anything. She asked me, "Why are you traveling." I kept it simple telling her I was returning home from a business meeting. She went on, "And what do you do?" I didn't want to lie but something told me that if I said pastor I would never get any rest. Since the entire meeting had been about health insurance for clergy I fudged a bit and said, "I was dealing with employee health insurance." I figured most people don't want to talk to insurance agents. I was right and she said not another word to me on the flight home. I felt guilty but relieved. Or here is another example. I was with a group and someone made a critical statement about folks who go to church. I am sure they thought I was out of earshot. I chose to pretend not to hear instead of creating an issue. Often our forms of denial are like this. We don't publicly say we don't know Jesus or we go to church because to do so would be uncomfortable. We instead pretend not to hear comments that should be challenged or to act in ways that keep the subject of religion or faith from ever coming up. Peter's sin of denial was also the sin of arrogance because he did not believe he would ever act the way Jesus said they would all act, and often, as I said, denial is the sin of comfortability, our wanting to fit in with the crowd instead of taking a stand.

When we think of those times it will bring us pain and sorrow and cause us to make a choice. The choice is this: Will we continue to live unfaithfully or will we learn from our sins and make something beautiful of our mistakes? This choice comes daily. Peter learned from his mistakes. He is confronted by the risen Lord and has to three times proclaim his love. He goes on to live into his name. He faithfully proclaims the good news as he becomes a traveling evangelist. In the end, legend has it that he was arrested as part of the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero. When he learned he was to be crucified he requested to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die in the way his Lord had died. It is said that the faithful came and watched his death remembering his faith. He became the rock, a rock of faith. Peter had learned from his denials and the pain they caused him. He had asked for and received forgiveness. And he grew in faith and in strength so that in the end we remember him for his faithfulness and his love of Jesus not for his moments of denial. He moved beyond his sins and found life.

The question asked in the book is a good one for us all: "Can we take our common sin of denial and turn it into faithful to the end?" Where have you learned and grown? The guilt of that trip stayed with me for a bit. I was back in Chicago for another meeting and on coming home was surrounded by a group of women who had been somewhere for a conference. They asked me why I was traveling. This time I said, "I am a Methodist minister and I was at a workshop for pensions." There was a moment of silence as they recalled the conversation just prior about their last night at the bar in the hotel, but then we moved on. We had lovely chats about things, nothing religious, and yet I believe a little more meaningful than normal chatting that happens in planes. And I felt so good. And as to the other incident; that individual had a family health crisis a bit ago and asked for prayers. When later he thanked me for those prayers I said that is the good part of going to church. I am not sure he remembered the other comment but he has never put down church people who go to church around me again. I have grown. There are other areas God still has to work on!

Denial, we all do it in one form or another. But we are offered forgiveness, the choice to make a better decision tomorrow and turn our denial into something beautiful called faithfulness. May it be so!