

Sept 8            I Will Not Deny You

Matthew 26:31-35

We come now to one of the most known, yet tragic stories concerning Peter's interactions with Jesus. It is the story of Peter denying Jesus three times. Have you ever asked yourself the questions, "Why would the church tell the story of his denial?" By the time the gospels were written Peter had been the leader of the new faith for thirty years before dying a heroic martyr's death. This had to be one of the most painful moments of Peter's life. It could easily have been seen as a stumbling block when encouraging the faithful who were facing persecution and death at the hands of the Romans to remain steadfast. Peter denied Jesus to save his life. Would it be so wrong for them to do the same thing? Today, we will look at the event, what we can learn about it and why it was so important that it became, not a stumbling block but, a solid rock on which early believers built their faith.

Our story begins with the disciples gathered with Jesus for the Passover meal. They had been with Jesus for three years. They had listened to him teach, they had seen him perform miracles and had forged a deep bond of affection with him. They did not know it at the time, but this would be the last meal that they would eat with him before his death.

In John's account, Jesus decides to stress one last time the importance of service to others. In the culture of that day it was customary for the host to offer water for people to wash the dust off their feet before people reclined to eat a special meal. In a wealthier home, a slave would have performed the task. Otherwise, usually someone volunteered to be the one to kneel and pour water over the feet of the others. That night all the disciples had come in and refused this act of kindness. It would seem that the old issues of who was most important were still being played out in the dynamics of this group. Jesus takes on the task that all the other felt was beneath them, to teach them again the role of servant leadership. Of course, when he gets to Peter, he objects. He says what all the others were thinking, "You shouldn't be doing this. You are the teacher." When Jesus insists, Peter then does a Peter thing. He goes to the other extreme and says, "Don't just wash my feet, but also my hands, and pour a little water

on my head as well.” Don’t you love Peter? He is never one to be happy with a middle of the road type of response.

Then Jesus, after washing all of their feet including Judas whom he knew would betray him, reminds them of the need to serve, and then shares how they will all desert him before the night is over. Once again, it was Peter, the Rock, who spoke up first and most forcefully. He said that even if all the others would desert Jesus, he never would. Jesus could count on him. These were bold words from the man who would deny Jesus three times before the night was out. Why do you think Peter, who by this point had seen Jesus’ wisdom and authority many times over, refused to believe Jesus’ prediction that he would deny knowing him? I believe Peter sincerely meant what he said. I don’t believe Peter could envision any scenario that would make him deny or desert his friend. Yet, when it came down to the moment when he himself might be arrested, he was overcome by fear.

We need to not overlook the time in the garden when the crowd comes for Jesus. Peter sprang into action, drawing the sword he was carrying, striking one of the men. He was the only one of the disciples to act. His act of courage was an attempt to do precisely what he had promised Jesus. He was willing to stay with Jesus and possibly die for or with him, rather than desert him. But this courageous action could have gotten all the other disciples and Jesus killed on the spot. This would have ended everything. These were the ones who were to carry on Jesus’ work. So, Jesus stops Peter and offers himself to the authorities asking that they let the others go. Then Peter and the rest flee in fear.

We remember him for his denial of Jesus but consider the courage it took to step into the courtyard of the high priest. In one of the gospels John is said to have also been present. Peter’s denial, was that of a courageous man. The others did not deny Jesus because they had not put themselves into a situation to deny him!

This story engenders such pathos. Peter demonstrated a courage and faithfulness to Jesus that none of the other disciples could muster. He sought to defend Jesus with the sword, then followed all the way to the courtyard, seeking to fulfil his promise to Jesus. But in the end, fear led the Rock to curse and swear and to deny

even knowing Jesus. Realizing what he had done caused him to flee in tears and shame. Have you ever thought about how Peter felt after the crucifixion, before Easter? He likely sat by himself so ashamed that he had failed Jesus after his bold pronouncements. He probably wondered what the others would say if they knew what he had done. Then with the coming of Easter it would have increased his shame, not alleviated it. But more about that another day.

Back to our question: Why would Peter share this incident so many times that it became so associated with him that all four Gospels record it? Peter's story shows us that denying Jesus is part of our all-too-human experience as disciples. His story reminded those who were hearing it that strong convictions are not enough. Fear is real and it can cause you to do things you are ashamed of. I think, that in sharing his moment of weakness, he was letting others know that they need to rely on Jesus, not their own sense of belief. We are weak but, through Jesus, we can be strong. Many who heard his story of failure went on to faithfully live the faith, even in the face of death and many were martyred for their faith. So even to today we need to remind ourselves that we are not strong enough, on our own, to be faithful. When we think we have what it takes to be faithful, we will likely fail. But when we rely on Jesus, trusting in his strength, we are strong.

Also, I believe Peter shared this story to remind people that we need not be defined by our failures. You can find forgiveness and move on. We will talk about this, next week.

Today I want us to wrestle with a couple of questions. First, "How have we denied Jesus?" Every week there is some place or some time when I, as a Christian, should have said or done something but did not. They are not dramatic events like Peter's but I see them, when I am willing to look.

Let me give you one moment from my life. I was in the dentist chair with a new hygienist. She was one of those chatty types that asks you all sorts of questions. She asked me if I was retired and I said no. Then she said, "What do you do?" I have to admit to pausing for several seconds before answering. Do I tell her I am a United Methodist Pastor, knowing I was going to hear her theology of life for the next several

minutes as she cleaned my teeth? Or do I share something like, "I am a manager." I cursed myself for not having lied and said I was retired. But finally I confessed. I would like to say it was out of conviction and not wanting to be a Peter, but the real answer was I couldn't conjure up a good answer that wouldn't have brought more questions. As it turned out her response was, "Oh, that's nice." She never mentioned religion at all!

But many times I am hesitant to share my faith because of the situation. Peter's story reminds us that we need to rely upon Jesus' strength and not be ashamed. We all have times where we find it hard to remain faithful in the face of societal pressures. We know the right things to do but sometimes we find our actions are less than of God.

The other question is, "When am I so sure of myself that I don't think I need God?" It is in these moment that I get into trouble. I think of times when I know I am going into a tense meeting. If I think, I can keep calm I often find myself boiling inside and sometimes boiling over. When I say, "God, there is a tough meeting ahead, help me to keep calm." Usually when those internal feelings start to boil I am reminded that God is there, I take a deep mental breath and move through that meeting with a great deal more grace than if I willed it to happen.

So Peter shared the story many times knowing that some who were listening would face what he faced. He didn't want them to be over confident but to trust in Jesus to help them. And, he wanted them to know there is grace when we fail. Good words for us as well.