



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for March 15, 2020
"According to Luke: Denied"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers." He said to him, "Lord, I am prepared to go to prison and to die with you." But he replied, "I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows this day, you will deny three times that you know me..."

After arresting him they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest; Peter was following at a distance. They lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter sat down with them. When a maid saw him seated in the light, she looked intently at him and said, "This man too was with him." But he denied it saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A short while later someone else saw him and said, "You too are one of them"; but Peter answered, "My friend, I am not." About an hour later, still another insisted, "Assuredly, this man too was with him, for he also is a Galilean." But Peter said, "My friend, I do not know what you are talking about." Just as he was saying this, 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." He went out and began to weep bitterly.
(Luke 22:31-34, 54-62)

The Rooster's Reminder

I didn't grow up on the farm, but I do know a rooster's crow. It's unmistakable. As you know, the rooster crows every morning right before dawn, just like clockwork.

Some years ago, while on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic I remember one cock's crow like it was yesterday.

We had traveled all night. Our flight was delayed in Miami. We arrived at our destination ready to bed down for a couple of hours sometime around 5:00 a.m. We were exhausted and looked forward to what sleep we could get.

I'll never forget it. Almost the second my head hit the pillow a rooster crowed outside our window. He crowed and crowed and crowed. All I could do was laugh.

Even to this day, every time I hear a rooster crow I remember that early morning in the Dominican Republic.

A More Serious Story of a Rooster Crowing

Fred Craddock tells a more serious story. He was driving by himself cross country when he stopped at a small diner for an early morning breakfast and some coffee. The sun had not yet come up.

As he waited for his breakfast, he saw a man who had just come in and sat down on a stool at the counter. The night manager treated the man with a disrespect that was clearly borne out of a deep-seated racism. The manager was rude, insulting, and demeaning.

Craddock wrestled with saying something, but kept to himself. *“I quietly paid my bill, left the diner, and headed back to my car”* he said. *“But as I walked through the parking lot, off in the distance, I heard a rooster crow.”*

With the cock crowing Craddock knew that he had fallen short. He remembered Peter and the way he had fallen short.

Craddock shares that to this day he doesn't hear a cock crow without thinking about that early morning.

The Legend of Peter's Denial

Legend has it that the story of Peter's denial spread throughout Jerusalem. Given the fact that people love to make others feel bad about their shortcomings, they were quick to imitate a crowing rooster every time Peter walked by.

Some have even said that the imitation of a crowing rooster gave way to the cackle of a chicken and hence the origin of linking being called a chicken with being a coward.

Roosters Crowing in Our Own Lives

There are roosters crowing in our lives all the time, people that just won't let us forget our failings. Sometimes those roosters are of our own making.

Even scripture or church can function that way. We find ourselves shying away from scripture or taking part in church for fear we'll be reminded of the wrong of our lives.

Living with the ways we have denied the Lord is not at all easy.

Each of us to the person is very much aware that we have denied the Lord more times than we would ever care to admit—both by word and by deed.

We have denied the Lord by our silence or our bent toward not getting involved. We would much rather stay comfortable than taking the risk of standing strong.

Over-Confidence

In our scripture lesson for today Peter comes across as a pretty sympathetic figure. We realize in the story of his denial that we are so much like him.

Peter's fatal flaw though was his over-confident. He was just sure he would never deny the Lord. In fact, he said he was ready to accompany Christ to prison, and if not to prison, then to death.

We know from scripture that that over-confidence took Peter only so far. Being bold and brash has its limits.

In an age where self-confidence, even being over-confident is considered an important personality trait, I hope we are learning that confidence in God is even more important, particularly when faced with the stresses and strains of life.

Fear

It was fear though that really tipped the scale for Peter. Fear would have overwhelmed us as well.

It's easy to think that it wouldn't have, but then again we're two thousand years removed from what Peter was facing and Peter was facing a lot.

Being a Christ follower isn't all that easy, particularly when we are called on to share how we are related to Jesus. We are all too often silent about that. We may even go so far as to deny we even know him.

We've got to hand it to Peter at least he had the gumption to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest.

As we know Peter sort of stood on the periphery of things, but not so faraway that he couldn't be recognized.

There on the periphery a servant girl approached him. *"I saw you with him,"* she said. *"I don't know what you're talking about,"* he responded.

Two others approached Peter, each claiming he was a follower of Christ and each time he denied that was true.

To the last one he said, "You don't know what you're talking about."

With that Jesus turned and looked right at Peter. When it comes to Jesus, it's always an individual thing, isn't it?

The scripture records that Peter ran from Christ's presence, weeping bitterly. Peter had failed the Lord and he knew it. We can only imagine the pain he felt.

Billy Strayhorn, in talking about us, says there are times when it comes to you and me that we want to be no more than *"unnoticed Christians."*

We are quite content to keep things to ourselves. We fear what others might say. We wonder how we might be received. We consider the repercussions that might follow. We begin to count the costs.

We go about life content to let our faith in Christ go *"unnoticed."*

Failure

Peter knew what he had done as soon as he did it. He knew he had done the very thing he said he wouldn't do. He also knew he had done the very thing Jesus had warned him about.

Peter had failed Jesus miserably. There is no worse feeling in the world than to realize you have failed the Lord.

The interesting thing about failure is that it can either devastate us or can propel us to do better next time.

It can lead us to lean on God, instead of our own energies. In the end, that's the very place Peter ended up.

Forgiveness

The story of Peter's denial and what follows is great Lenten scripture. Peter's denial is very much a part of the last week of Christ's life.

This scripture also points us to the hope and promise of Easter.

In spite of Peter's failings, God was all about redeeming his life.

As we know, Jesus was arrested and put to death, and after three days rose from the dead, only to minister to the very people who left him to face his crucifixion alone.

In other words, Jesus was quick upon his resurrection to redeem the very lives of those who had failed him.

There at the empty tomb, the angel of the Lord told the women who had come to tend to the dead body of their friend, *"Go, tell his disciples, and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee and there you will see him, just as he told you."* (Mark 16:7)

Peter was called by name. Jesus would make sure that Peter's past failures would be forgiven. The resurrected Lord offered grace that day and that grace would revolutionize Peter's life.

As we know from the accounts of that first Easter Peter had to see for himself that Christ had risen from the dead.

Peter was that desperate. He longed to be released from the guilt of his denials.

The Hope of Resurrection

Christ's resurrection signaled a brand new start for Peter.

The closing verses of the Gospel of John have the resurrected Lord asking Peter three separate times, *"Do you love me?"*

Each time Peter responded by saying, *"Yes."*

It's interesting that Peter having denied Jesus three times was asked by Jesus three times, "*Do you love me?*"

It's as if Jesus was undoing the very thing Peter had done. Now that's grace.

The forgiveness that Peter experienced propelled him to go and do just as Jesus had wanted him to do all along—to give leadership to the church that would soon form.

It's interesting that Peter would eventually make his way to Jerusalem, the very place where he had denied Jesus. Peter could now face the wrong of his life, because he had been set free from it. The guilt of what he had done was lifted because he had been forgiven.

The trajectory of Judas' life took a different direction. Judas also failed Jesus as well. As we know he had betrayed Jesus. Judas though took matters into his own hands and took his own life.

He never gave himself the chance to be redeemed like Peter did.

What about Us?

For us, we are given pause to consider the ways we deny the Lord.

We also are given pause to consider the great grace of our God who brings forgiveness even in the midst of those denials.

If Jesus forgave Peter then we can be forgiven as well.