

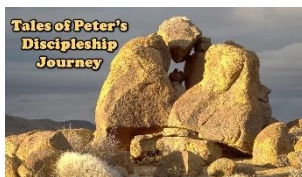
Betrayal & Regret



<Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75>

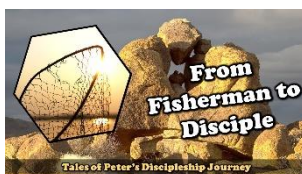
31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' 32 But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 33 Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71 When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." 73 After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." 74 Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed. 75 Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

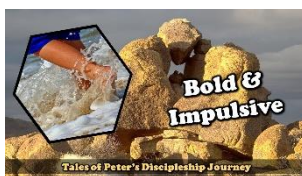


In this sermon series we are looking at the stories of the disciple Simon, who was known by the end of Jesus' ministry as Peter. Many Christians today identify with Peter's weaknesses, not least his knack of opening his mouth and putting his foot in it! Peter is known for being spontaneous and impulsive while also becoming a courageous and faithful disciple. How

does Peter's story speak to us today?



We started with the story of Peter fishing and when Jesus calls to him and commands him to come and follow him, Peter immediately left his nets to follow Jesus. How impulsive and courageous of Peter. Peter listened and obeyed with no idea where Jesus was going to lead him. And so, Peter's journey from Fisherman to Disciple began.



Then last week, we had the story of Peter walking on the water and having to be rescued. He had a tale to tell, an experience to ponder, and came to a greater understanding of Jesus. Peter's experience shows us that we can expect to waver sometimes. Our hearts will be touched, and as we attempt to do so we'll be in over our heads. When Jesus plucks us back out, he'll set us back on course that's a little different from before.



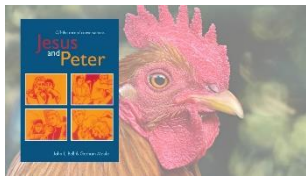
Today's topic is *Betrayal & Regret* as we look at how Peter denied Jesus and wept when he realized that Jesus' words to him about denial had come true. Before I go any further, let me reassure you that next week's topic is about Jesus forgiving and restoring Peter. Our worst moments are not our only moments. This low point of Peter's life was just one chapter in his long story. We will leave Peter today at this low point in his story, a little bit like we sit with the crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection comes on the third day. So, yes, I am going to

leave us pondering our own denials today, but I want you to know that we do not have to be defined by our failures. God will forgive us, redeem us, and then we can use our failures to be a witness to others. Part of our human experience as a disciple is with some regularity to blow it, to get it wrong.

I am sure that when Peter said that he would never deny Jesus, that he was sincere and he truly meant it. Peter could not imagine a circumstance when he would deny knowing Jesus *once*, let alone three times. Promises are easy to make when a threatening condition is remote, but when risk and danger happen, it is much harder to hold onto those promises. Fear is not the only reason that we break a promise, but it certainly is one of the reasons. Events can ambush us, leap out at us, when we least expect it and catch us unaware. There is no time to analyse and think out a rational response. Our reflex reactions come instinctively, but they also come from years of practice. Self-absorption hinders self-giving. Fear strangles love. Despair silences hope.

We have all, like Peter, denied Jesus by our thoughts, our words, or our deeds, both by what we have done and by what we should have done but did not. We have all lived at times in ways that were inconsistent with our pledge to follow Christ. We have mistreated others. We have joined in the taunting, teasing, or gossip that hurt others. We have given in to materialism or idolatry or lust. We have been afraid to speak up in the face of injustice or to stand up to a bully or work to advocate for justice. For all of us, there have been moments when our witness or example was needed, but we remained silent and did nothing.

How do we feel when we realize that we have got it wrong? I think when it is really obvious that we have blown something, then we are remorseful and full of regret. But sometimes, even though we know that what we did was not really very good, we still keep on trying to justify our response.



I wonder what Peter might have been thinking at the time? Maybe the conversation in his head went something like this. <Skit: The Denial from a Wild Goose Publications book called *Jesus and Peter, Off the Record Conversations* by John Bell and Graham Maule.> In that monologue at first Peter justified his action of denial by saying he didn't want to talk to a stranger, a chamber-maid, a waitress. He even said that he would make the same response again. And then the cock crowed. And Peter decided that he would not respond that way again; instead he would say nothing, neither affirming or denying Jesus and thus avoiding the confrontation. Did the ending of the skit surprise you? As we were recording this skit, we expected it to finish with remorse or regret and when it didn't, we had a lively conversation. Why this ending?

In our reading from Matthew, the passage finished with Peter weeping bitterly. And yet, that is the last mention that Matthew makes of Peter. Luke tells us that the women were at the cross. John tells us that the beloved disciple was too. But there is no mention of the other disciples including Peter. One interpretation is that Peter continues to flee from the crucifixion, not speaking up, but not explicitly denying Jesus either.

Do you make excuses to cover up your shortcomings and justify the behaviour? Do you try to avoid conflict, and try to find a neutral place? I can feel myself being convicted just by preparing this sermon!

Being a minister makes conversations with strangers a little 'interesting'. Do I tell them my profession or not? Folk usually react in one of a few ways. Either it is a total conversation stopper, and they start looking for a way out Or they tell me their life story and either want advice or want to tell me all about their faith and have a theological debate. So, sometimes it is just easier to avoid

the 'what's your job' question especially on an aeroplane when I am on vacation and where neither they nor I can escape! Yet, each time I do that, it feels like I am denying Jesus. #

And then there is the question, What should I do when people come out with some of those clichés? You've all heard them, like 'God won't give you more than you can handle' or 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it' or 'God wanted another angel' or 'my church does not believe in women instructing men.' Now there are times, such as when someone is bereaved, when I would not challenge their theology. But there are other times, when letting people go on with their theology that can do so much damage to others that they encounter, that it is appropriate to speak up. But, I do not always do so. Sometimes, it is just easier to keep quiet and avoid the conversation rather than getting into an argument. And sometimes I fear getting into the arguments; what will happen if that person gets angry with me?

Denying Jesus, can take many forms. Verbally denying that we are Christians is one. Not speaking up is another way. And then there is not taking the actions to love our neighbors and even our enemies that we are called to take as Christians.

Rev. Julian Pursehouse in his letter to the district this week reminded us that if you are living in poverty and deprivation in the UK you are twice as likely to both contract the virus and die from it. He said us that as people of faith we cannot rest content or indeed passive in the face of such deep injustice.¹



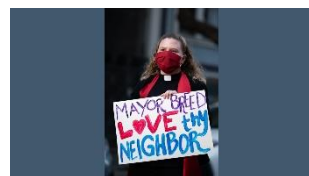
Our monetary donations are one way to respond to injustice. Whether that is support locally for FIND and the food bank. Or supporting ALL WE CAN, the Methodist Development Agency. Or Christian Aid or other charities.



In the USA, the Native American reservations have been hit particularly hard. I was touched this week by the stories coming out of Ireland. At least 44 people have died from Covid-19 in the Navajo nation in the US, with the spike in cases partly attributed to a water crisis. A rate of 10 times higher than the rest of Arizona. An estimated 40 percent of the Navajo do not have running water at home, and a drought in the south-west has exacerbated the difficulties.

As the crisis intensified, the Navajo and Hopi families set up a GoFundMe campaign to raise cash to pay for bottled water. And families in Ireland heard about the request, and were reminded of the potato famine and the generosity in 1847 when the Choctaw Tribe, had dug deep to send money to them in Ireland. As their ancestors in Ireland were helped by the Native Americans, they decided to return the favor, and donations have flooded in from Ireland.²

While money can help to solve some injustice problems, advocacy is also needed. Keeping quiet instead of speaking up is a way of denying Jesus. It avoids confrontation, but does nothing to alleviate the causes of injustice.



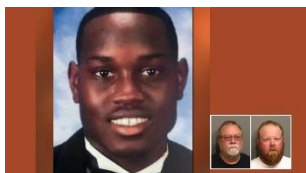
In my own life, as I think about Peter's denial, I tend to think more about my lack of action. I see some of my colleagues in California during this pandemic participating in socially distanced protesting and pushing for safer working conditions for low paid essential workers and for temporary housing in hotels for the homeless in San Francisco. Over here we have the Joint Public Issues Team and I am reminded that we have a way to work with other Christians to come together to advocate for the last and the least.



¹ <https://methodistic.org.uk/pastoral-letter-east-anglia-district-2/>

² <https://news.yahoo.com/irish-dig-deep-support-virus-201156553.html> and

<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-navajo-nations-infection-rate-10-times-higher-than-arizonas-2020-4>



We might think that our actions will never change an unjust situation and that it is not worth trying. But when there is a public pressure then sometimes, it can make a difference. You may have seen in the news this week, the story of Ahmaud Arbery. He was a 25 year-old African American man, a black American, who lived in Georgia. In Georgia, it is legal to openly carry a gun, and it is also legal to do a citizen's arrest if you have reasonable cause. In February, Ahmaud was out jogging in his own neighbourhood, when two white men, a father and son, were out in their truck, openly carrying their guns. The older man was a former police officer. They later claimed that they believed Ahmaud resembled the suspect in a series of local break-ins. So they said that they followed him, went past him, stopped their truck, and tried to 'talk' to Ahmaud, who was unarmed. They shot him dead, claiming that he attacked them. Three months later, with an increasing amount of public outcry, and only after a video came to light, showing Ahmaud trying to go around the car and being accosted, were the two white men were arrested and charged with murder and aggravated assault.³



I wonder, if I was in the USA now, what would I have done? Would I have signed petitions and spoken up? I give God thanks that Peter's flawed reaction to being asked on that holy evening made it into our scriptures. Peter's human response reminds us that we will not always get it right, although that is not an excuse to stop trying. God continued to use Peter, flaws and all, writing more and more chapters in his life, until his death. Reflecting back on his life, the church even made him a Saint. And so I ponder my own failings, and wonder what the next chapter in my life will look like.

For the witness of Peter, his failures and his successes.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Resources

Hamilton, Adam. *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.

Jarvis, Cynthia A. and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Eds. *Feasting on the Gospels. Matthew, Volume 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52585505> and <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/07/ahmaud-arbery-former-police-officer-and-son-charged-in-shooting-of-black-man>