

“PETER’S DENIAL AND JESUS’ FORGIVENESS”

Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

Benjamin Franklin, the prominent diplomat, scientist, inventor and philosopher from the early years of our country, is not particularly remembered as a religious person, but he desired to attain certain moral standards. At one time in his life he attempted to attain moral perfection through his own efforts. His approach was to draw up a list of twelve virtues which he thought embodied the essential traits of a good life. His plan was to keep a little book in which a page was devoted to each virtue. Then he ruled each page with seven columns—one for each day of the week. His program was to focus on a different quality each week by keeping track of each daily violation of that virtue. By going through the list Franklin believed he could attain moral perfection. One day he showed his list to a Quaker friend who noted that Franklin had not included the virtue of humility. So Franklin added it immediately so the list read temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity—and humility. He did his best to attain good and avoid evil through his own disciplined efforts. Ben Franklin, though a very wise and intelligent man, had the misconception that through his own efforts he could attain moral superiority.

We see that same characteristic in the apostle Peter in the scripture we just heard read. In the first part of this reading we find Jesus and his disciples assembled in the Upper Room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Passover. The disciples are feeling tense as they have been hearing reports in the streets of increasing anger toward Jesus. They remember that while traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem that Jesus had spoken of going to the Holy City to die. Earlier that evening Jesus had taken some of the bread and wine from the meal and given it to them with instructions to eat and drink in remembrance of his broken body and shed blood. Clearly, there are hints that something bad is going to happen to Jesus.

Then Jesus shocks the disciples by suggesting that very night all of them would desert him by running away. The disciples are not sure how to respond to this accusation. The majority

sit in stunned silence. Then Peter—yes, the Peter who was the first to drop his fishing nets to follow Jesus, the Peter who could not resist jumping out of the boat to join Jesus in walking on the water, the Peter whom Jesus announced would serve as the rock foundation upon whom the church would be built, the Peter who wanted Jesus to not just wash his feet but his hands and head also, the Peter who correctly answered the question when Jesus asked, “*Who do you say I am?*”—this same impulsive Peter speaks up to assure Jesus that no matter what the others do, he can be counted on. He will not desert Jesus. Peter goes so far as to declare he is ready to go to prison or even to die with Jesus. Then Jesus makes his point again by predicting that before the rooster crows—signaling the dawning of a new day—that Peter would deny knowing Jesus, not just once, but three times.

Later that evening Jesus and his disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It is there that the temple guards arrest Jesus. He is taken to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, to be interrogated by the Jewish authorities. The home of this religious leader is typical of those of well-to-do citizens in first century Palestine. The rooms of the house open off an interior courtyard where a fire has been built to give warmth on a cool evening. The scripture indicates that while all the other disciples have fled and gone into hiding, Peter alone follows Jesus to the home of Caiaphas, and even into the courtyard where he stands by the fire. Doing so is a courageous act on Peter’s part, indicating his intention to fulfill his promise to not desert Jesus.

As Peter stands by the fire, one of the high priest’s servant girls points to Peter and announces loudly so all can hear, “*You were with Jesus of Galilee, weren’t you?*” Peter instinctively denies the accusation, “*I don’t know him.*” Feeling uneasy about having been identified, Peter leaves the warmth of the fire and goes to stand near the entrance to the courtyard. It is cooler there, but also darker and Peter hopes he will be less recognizable. But Peter’s strategy does not work. A little later Peter is approached again. (Interestingly, the gospel accounts are not in agreement here. Mark reports it is the same servant girl; Matthew says it is another servant girl; while Luke records it is a man.) The point is, Peter is identified as one of Jesus’ disciples a second time, and even more emphatically denies it. Later that evening the

sequence repeats itself. This time it is noted his accent gives him away as a Galilean. Peter swears he does not know Jesus, and even punctuates his answer with an oath, *“May God strike me down if I am not telling the truth!”* Then it happens! A rooster crows which reminds Peter of Jesus’ prediction. Peter feels terrible because, under pressure, he has failed to keep his promise to Jesus. He has failed to attain the level of faithfulness he desires, and had even promised Jesus.

My guess is every one of us understands that moment and can identify with it. We too have been in situations when, under pressure, we failed to do as we had intended; our actions failed to live up to our intentions. Nikita Khrushchev was the Prime Minister of the old Soviet Union. Those of us who are old enough remember his demonstration at the United Nations when he took off his shoe and pounded it on the delegate-table in protest of a speech being made by the Philippine delegate. On another occasion Khrushchev gave a speech at the Washington Press Club luncheon in which he talked of some of the dreadful practices of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin. Written questions were submitted following his talk. The first question asked is this, *“Today you talked about the hideous rule of your predecessor Stalin. You condemned a number of his actions. Yet you were one of his closest aides and a part of his inner circle during those years. What were you doing all that time?”* Khrushchev’s face turns beet red and he roars, *“Who asked that question?”* In the friendly confines of the Press Club on safe American soil, no one admits to being the inquirer. Again Khrushchev demands to know who asked that question. A long silence follows. Then Khrushchev answers, *“That’s what I was doing. I was playing it safe by keeping quiet.”* Yes, we too have *“been there, done that.”*

Let’s return to the Biblical story. Interestingly, Luke’s account of this scene includes one detail not recorded by the other gospel writers. Matthew and Mark indicate that when reminded by the rooster’s crow that he had failed to keep his word, Peter immediately *“went out and wept bitterly”*. On the other hand, Luke inserts Jesus into the courtyard scene, suggesting *“Jesus turned around and looked straight at Peter.”* According to Luke’s account, as Peter turns to leave the courtyard, broken hearted, something catches his attention. Possibly it is the commotion caused by the movement of persons. Peter turns to look and sees Jesus being

escorted by guards from the room where he had been interrogated all night. Possibly feeling the strong eyes of Jesus on him, Peter looks up and their eyes meet. The scripture does not describe the look on Jesus' face. That is left of our speculation. My own sense is that it was not a look of condemnation or judgment or rejection, but rather a look which communicated compassion, love and forgiveness. Nor does the scripture record any words spoken between the two. I cannot help but wonder if he had had the chance, what would Jesus have said to Peter? I could envision it being something like this. *“Peter, your intentions were good and I thank you for that. But today you learned an important lesson about what it means to be human. In part, it means at times you will fail. You will not always be able to attain your good intentions. But be assured, Peter, when you fail you are forgiven and given another chance.”*

William Barclay, the Scottish biblical scholar, writes of an evangelist by the name of Brownlow North who, in his younger days, had been pretty wild. One Sunday before entering the pulpit to preach, the evangelist is handed a letter recounting a rather shameful incident from his youth, along with the threat that if North dared to try to preach the letter writer would stand to interrupt the sermon to publicly announce the sinful deed. Faced with the possibility of a dishonorable episode from his past being revealed, what would the evangelist do? What he does is take the letter with him into the pulpit and reads it to the congregation, and acknowledges that the accusation of sin is true. He is guilty. Then the preacher goes on to effectively tell how through Christ Jesus he has received forgiveness which has enabled him to put the past behind him.

What I find compelling about this scriptural account is to realize the only reason we know about Peter's denial in the courtyard is because Peter must have been willing to share it. Remember, he was the only disciple there. All the others had fled out of fear. None of them heard Peter deny Jesus. Peter could have kept his denial a secret out of shame. Instead, Peter shared this account because it embodies the message which is central to the Christian faith. It is as if Peter would recount—possibly at every opportunity he had—*“Hey, let me tell you my story. I failed to keep my word to never desert Jesus. I denied him when the pressure was on. Yes, I let*

Jesus down when he needed me the most, but you know what, Jesus forgave me and gave me another chance.” **As Jesus forgave Peter when he denied his Lord in the courtyard, that same forgiveness is available to you and me when we fail to fulfill our intentions to serve Jesus faithfully.** It is that forgiveness of God which we shall celebrate in the Communion bread and drink.

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March 14, 2021