

Title: *From denial to action*

Luke 22:32-34 (before Jesus' arrest)

'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, <sup>32</sup>*but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*' <sup>33</sup>And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' <sup>34</sup>Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.'

Luke 22:54-62

<sup>54</sup> Then they seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. <sup>55</sup> When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. <sup>56</sup> Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' <sup>57</sup> But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' <sup>58</sup> A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' <sup>59</sup> Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' <sup>60</sup> But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. <sup>61</sup> The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' <sup>62</sup> And he went out and wept bitterly.

The different gospels give us slightly different versions of this event, this morning we follow Luke's version of things. Jesus has been arrested, and Peter follows the arresting group at a safe distance – the only one of the disciples to follow. They come to the house of the High Priest where Jesus is kept until morning, Peter waits outside in the courtyard. Presumably still trying to keep a safe distance. There the fire is just bright enough that a few recognize Peter – he has been seen with other disciples hanging around Jesus in the temple over the past days. He is accused three times by those around the fire as being one of Jesus' followers, and three times he denies this. With each accusation, his denial gets louder and longer. And that final time, just before the sun rises, in what some commentaries call, "perhaps the most poignant moment in the entire Gospel", Jesus turns and looks at Peter from across the courtyard as the rooster crows. And, as the story goes, Peter is overwhelmed in the emotion of all that has just taken place – at his own failing – and he leaves and weeps bitterly.

We see in Peter's denial one who breaks loyalty to escape danger, one who is moved by great fear to say things that he is ashamed of. And in Jesus' look to Peter, we feel an extra sense of betrayal. Peter has seemingly tried to be brave in following after Jesus' arrest, but in the end, he fails to be the bold and brave disciple that he hopes and imagines himself to be.

I spent a good part of this week at a conference at the Cathedral of the Rockies, the Northwest Leadership Institute, and there are parts of those conferences that are intended to inspire us that

inevitably leave you feeling like a failure – reflecting on all the ways you have not been as successful, of all the ways you have failed to do some of the things that are being presented. In seminary I took courses on Community Development and Engagement, courses on Leadership – in these types of courses you are always reading books full of grand success stories – churches that have gone from 20 people to 2,000; churches that have made great connections in their community through community organizing, or programming efforts – churches that have started businesses, kept people out of prison, and so on. In one of my courses in Chicago we met one of these authors, Robert Lupton who was pastor of a large church and whose church had done some incredible things – and we met him at a well-known Chicago pizza joint, it was the tenth of their franchise opened in Chicago. And he had convinced the owners of to consider their tenth restaurant as a tithe, that they would hire only people transitioning out of prison to work there, connected with another program of his church. At these conferences you hear stories like this, and in books like these, you read stories like this.

And sometimes these stories deeply inspire you. And sometimes they make you feel like crap. I had done enough failing in my work prior to going to seminary that when I would read books full of these stories, what I found myself longing for was a book full of stories about people failing greatly – or, at least for these books to include a few true failure stories on their way to grand successes.

About six months or so during one of my shifts at Corpus, I walked into the office after an interaction with a guest that went incredibly poorly. I walked into the office and declared, “well, I sure could have handled that better.” One of our services is that we have a Clothing room,

where people can get a change of clothing each day. To try and summarize a weird situation, two guests were arguing over a sweatshirt. The woman wearing it had gotten it from the clothing room, and there was a man who said it was his and had been his. And he was getting increasingly agitated over it.

I tried to intervene. I tried to explain that if things get left on property, we wash them and put them in the clothing room for others to wear – we can't take clothes away from people they got in the clothing room. It did not help. Things kept ramping up, eventually I had to ask him to leave. He wouldn't. I told him I would have to call the police if he didn't leave. He said fine. So I did.

Luckily, it took the police a long time to arrive. During that extended response time, he came up with an idea of how we could solve this. We simply went into the main room and asked everyone – “hey, have you all seen this guy wearing this sweatshirt?” To which a bunch of folks answered, “Oh yeah, he wears that all the time.” To this, the person who got it from the Clothing Room agreed to give it back to him. A fairly simple idea, I wish I had thought of it ten minutes earlier. “I could have handled that better.”

Or, I think of another time when a guest who used to help run Corpus before my time came in needing help with rent and wanted to borrow some money. I had heard his name from Board Members as a former Guest-Worker who done a lot of work for us in the past. And so I thought we would want to help out this guy, since he once helped run Corpus. About an hour later Henry, one of the founders of Corpus came in, and I told him that this former Guest-Worker had been

by. And he laughed a bit and said, “Oh yeah, at the end of his time, he stole a bunch of stuff from us – don’t ever lend him money.” *Whoops*.

These would be just a few of my stories of failures in my book of *Christian Community Engagement*, there are many more stories of failure, some of which are much more personal and painful than those two stories. As we seek to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, we will fail. We will repeatedly make mistakes, say or do the wrong thing, go in the wrong direction. We will fail.

Jesus seems to recognize this, that his followers are bound to fail. After Jesus shares his last meal with his disciples, but before he is arrested, he pulls Peter aside to remind him of this fact – he is going to fail. Jesus tells him that before the rooster crows at the rise of the morning sun, he is going to deny his affiliation with Jesus three times. To this Peter, in his zeal, asserts that this will never happen, declaring, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” Of course, Peter fails to keep this promise – he fails to live up to who he hopes he can be – he fails to live up to the bravest and most faithful vision he has of himself. It is hard to live up to our highest hopes and visions for who we think we will be as followers of Christ.

These words of Jesus to Peter before his denial are so important. I think in our magical and divine sense of who Jesus is, we miss the impact of his words. Plus most of our Bibles give this discussion between Jesus and Peter a subtitle of something like, “Jesus Predicts Peter’s Denial” or “Peter’s denial foretold.” Which makes us, the readers, emphasize the **predicting** part as what

is most important – we sort of connect this to Jesus’ miracles, Jesus can walk on water, heal someone from Leprosy, and he can see the future. All that might be true, but I don’t think Jesus is talking to Peter about his denial to show-off that he can see what is coming. Jesus seems to be having this conversation with Peter because he wants to comfort him, he wants to assure him – “Peter, this is going to be a rough night for all of us and, when it is over, you are going to do some things you are going to be ashamed of. And that is okay. You are going to get through that pain and discomfort and when you do, your sisters and brothers are going to need you.”

Perhaps the point of why Peter’s denial story was remembered is not so much about his act of denial or Jesus’ ability to predict the future, but it is to emphasize a story of change and conversion: a story to illustrate a bit of Peter’s dramatic journey from what is here, probably his lowest point as a disciple – not only has Jesus been arrested, but he has just denied his Teacher, his Rabbi, his Lord. Peter who once so boldly proclaimed to Jesus, “You are the Messiah!” Here proclaims, “I do not know what you are talking about!”

This is the same Peter who later becomes the rock of the church. This same Peter who here denies and then turns away from following Jesus to his trial before the Sanhedrin, later speaks boldly in Jesus’ name before that same Sanhedrin (Acts chapter 4 & 5). This same Peter who is unwilling to face possible arrest and ridicule there in that courtyard, later goes to prison on multiple occasions for proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. This same Peter whose fear brings a lie out of his mouth in order to save his own life, later is too crucified by the Roman government.

Yes, I think that the point of Peter's story is less about emphasizing his time of denial and more about emphasizing his conversion, his change, his transformation – his ability to not be defined by his mistakes and failures – but to learn from them, to grow from them.

And let us not forget that Peter's failure here in his denying, it comes as a failure of trying to be faithful. He is the only disciple who follows Jesus after the arrest. He just is unable to be the fullness of who he longs to be in that moment. It is a failure in seeking faithfulness – it is a failure in faithfulness.

When I think of some of my many failings here as pastor, or at Corpus – it would be easy to get highly discouraged and give up. I am one who likes things to go well, especially if I am in charge. And I often beat myself up over mistakes and failings. But I think one of the reasons I have been able to persist, especially at Corpus, is because Henry is so willing to share the stories of his mistakes and wrong turns as he has worked with our homeless citizens over the decades. When you hear the founder tell story after story about things that did not go well, and he is able to laugh at them, and is still able to keep coming in everyday – it helps you remember that it is inevitable, we will fail. It helps to remember all those stories that don't make it into these books of Christian Community Development.

Friends, let us not kid ourselves, we will fail. But like Peter, let us not fail through complacency – let us fail boldly! Let us fail while striving to be faithful. Let us fail boldly in efforts to love.

As we strive to step out in faithfulness as followers of the God of love, we will fail again and again:

we will write letters using the wrong words

we will hold press conferences where no press show-up

we will in anger and frustration say things we regret

we will organize events where only a handful of people show-up

we will try to offer words of comfort and hear an awful cliché come out of our mouths

we will lend someone our power-washer so they can make a little extra money working and learn that they sold it at a pawnshop for five dollars

we will try to intervene to deescalate a situation and end-up escalating things

we will strive to get a law passed and see it not even make it to a vote

Let us like Peter fail boldly in striving to be faithful. And like Peter, let us be transformed and renewed in our failings, for our sister and brothers need us. Amen.