



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Denied”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 26: 26-35, 69-75

March 1, 2020

Reflection: Simon Peter

‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church!’ I don’t think there is a night I’ve laid down to bed without those words echoing through the depths of my soul. Did you know that this was the very meaning of the name that Jesus gave me? I was Simon, son of Jonah. But, that day that Jesus asked me who we was – that day I stood on my conviction that he was our Messiah, the Son of the living God – Jesus changed my name to Peter. He changed my name to ‘the rock.’ Then, he told me that on that rock he would build his church! I don’t think there is a night I’ve laid down to bed without those words echoing through the depths of my soul.

That’s what I was supposed to be – the rock at the foundation of his church! And, I think that’s why that night was so painful. I can’t express the hurt that inundated my heart when that rooster crowed. He knew! He told me I would do it! Just a few hours earlier I had looked him in the eyes and promised to live up to my name. But, he knew!

When that rooster crowed, I knew too!

The tears flooded my heart. The angst withered my spirit. The pain was nearly more than any man could bear. Jesus and I had had our moments in the years before. He had chastised me...called me out...there was one time he literally called me Satan. But, those were moments in which my mind was misguided, but my heart was steadfast. I didn’t always understand what he was trying to tell us. I didn’t always grasp what was unfolding around me. There were times my misguided devotion got in his way. But, my heart was steadfast, my devotion was true, and my faith was unwavering. That night, it wasn’t!

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When that rooster crowed, I knew too!

I can't express the hurt that inundated my heart. But...and this is a really big 'but'...that wasn't the end of the story! Throughout my journey with Jesus I had my ups and downs – my moments of grand faith, and my moments of terrific faltering. And, yes, when that rooster crowed it was hard to see any path that would ever allow me to emerge from the depths of that sorrow. But, in Jesus, there was. In Jesus, there always is.

In the days that followed we agonized over his death, we rejoiced in the empty tomb, and then he came to us again. He came to ME again. He told me to tend to his flock. He told me that my love for him would be expressed in my love for his church. After all I'd done...after my selfish refusal to stand with him at his time of trial...Jesus set before me, again, the path to be the rock on which his church would be built.

I've never been perfect. I never will be. I've had my moments of both faith and failure. But, Jesus called me to be the rock for his church anyway. Not because I'm better. Not because I'm more faithful. Not because I'm more holy than anyone else. Not because I am perfect. No! Jesus called me to be the rock for his Church because I know that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus called me to be the rock for his Church, because I know, as well as anyone, that no matter many times we may falter, he will always set before us a path to emerge from our despair!

Sermon: Denied

So, I have to admit that I was a little jealous of Julie this week. The way that our Lenten series laid out, in conjunction with the preaching schedule we delineated last summer, meant that Julie got to spend the week playing with the story of Judas. What made him tick, what brought him to that place, what drove villain of all villains...those are the questions Julie got to toy with this past week. And, I got Simon Peter – the unofficial team leader of the Disciples on whom I have preached dozens of times before. I was a little jealous.

Nonetheless, I am finding that the manner in which I am approaching this series is to start with the reflection before I write the sermon. I sit down and look at the story that the individual would tell and I let that narrative be the guide that moves me towards a message. So, that's what I did with Peter. I started putting words to the narrative that he would write, and the more I reflected, the more I engaged with his character, the more I was drawn into that underlying story misguided detours followed by new beginnings.

You see, that focal portion of the story for this week – those final moments in which Peter denies Jesus three times before the rooster crows – those were just the last in a list of moments in which Peter 'denied' Jesus.

- There was the first time Jesus foretold his death and resurrection – a prophecy Peter immediately rejected. That was the moment Jesus rebuked him and called him Satan.
- There was the night that Jesus knelt to wash the feet of the disciples and Peter refused. Again, Jesus rebuked him, this time telling him he would have no share with Jesus if he didn't allow his feet to be washed.
- Even at the moment of Jesus' arrest, John tells us that it was Peter who drew the sword and struck the ear of the high priest's slave. And, sure enough, Jesus rebuked him once again.

Now, it's important to note, here, that the heart behind Peter's actions was true. These were acts of devotion and commitment. These were responses of love and adoration. Peter was genuinely committed and devoted to Jesus but, even in the midst of that, he kept screwing up...getting it wrong...missing out on what Jesus was trying to do in his life. So, I don't mean to make Peter out to be some faithless or duplicitous character, but what really stood out to me in authoring his narrative was the fact that even Peter, whose heart was in the right place, continually managed to get it wrong. And, yet, no matter how many times he did...the grace of God, shown to him and us in Jesus, provided the path to a new beginning.

And that is what I think Peter's story shares with ours today. Even Peter, whose heart was steadfast and devotion was true...even Peter, who dropped everything to follow the one who called...even Peter, whose very name was chosen because his faith was the rock on which the church would be built...even Peter, who was all of that, continually got it wrong! And, so will we. Somewhere in our lives, today, each of us is having moments of denying Jesus. It might be in actions as overt as those of Peter on the night Jesus was arrested, or it might be in those more subtly misguided ways of Peter's walk with Jesus earlier in his ministry. But, somewhere, we are denying Jesus...we are denying God...we are faltering from the path that God has laid before us. And, yes, we need to try to correct that.

But, more than that, we need to rest in the hope of Jesus' response to Peter's denials. Because, the end of Peter's narrative is that, no matter many times Peter denied Jesus, there was always another path to a new beginning. No matter how many times Peter denied Jesus, there was always a rebuke followed by grace. No matter how many times Peter denied Jesus, Jesus never denied him. Let me say that again. No matter how many times Peter denied Jesus, Jesus never denied him. Somewhere, we are denying Jesus...we are denying God. Somewhere, we are faltering from the path that God has laid before us. And, yes, we need to try to correct that. But, more than that, we need rest in the hope of Peter's story as we are reminded that no matter how many times we deny Jesus, he will never, ever, deny us!