

ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- MARCH 11, 2012

“DENIED”

John 18:15-18; 25-27

As I travel back and forth to ZPC from the Southport area each day, I have listened to several books, which has been delightful. I’m presently listening to a long book about a storyteller who spends his life traveling throughout Ireland telling stories about their history. Often it is difficult to know where legend ends and facts begin.

As you know, I love to tell stories. I believe, as I heard a modern day bard say, that “Stories are the currency of the street.” Sometimes, however, you would just as soon not tell the story if it portrays a failure or weakness. Such is the case for a couple of stories I will tell in this sermon as well as the passage we will read from the bible. I deeply appreciate the fact that the Bible doesn’t pull any punches but presents its heroes in in all of their weaknesses and vulnerability.

Let me tell you about a story which happened nearly 43 years ago. Alice and I come from two very different backgrounds. There were 8 children in the blended family of my high school years, lived on a farm where money was really tight. Alice on the other hand grew up as an only child in a setting where her parents loved to shop together as a family. Her father and mother had worked hard and were happy that they could provide nice things.

Well, a couple of months after we were married, Alice and I moved to Louisville where I attended seminary. Her parents made sure her teeth were taken care of and she had a new and ward winter coat. They were pretty certain that, while they liked me, I would probably never be able to provide for their daughter in the way she had been accustomed.

After helping us move into our one room studio apartment, Alice’s parents wanted to go shopping at a nice department store. As they looked around, Alice found an outfit that she really liked. Realizing that we were in a different era, when we were away from Alice and her mother, her dad asked my permission to

buy her the outfit. Out of my desire to be the provider and my stubborn pride, I denied his request.

It was a very awkward moment, when Alice found out about it but I didn't back down. So Alice not only did not get that outfit that day, but her parents for the next several years didn't offer to buy clothes for her, wanting to be sensitive to my feelings. I denied her the kind of life she had grown up with.

As a quick aside, again out of a prideful desire to be the provider, a couple of days after that incident, I went out and bought her the outfit, spending almost all of the money we had to do it. Again this is a story of denial that I am not eager to tell.

Interestingly enough, Peter, the main character in the story of denial that I am about to read, must also have been reticent to share what happened. Yet, if he had not told it, it wouldn't have been a part of all four Gospel accounts. Especially after protesting Jesus' prediction of his denial, Peter had to feel like a miserable failure when all was said and done. In self-defacing vulnerability, Peter told the story of one of his greatest failures.

As we continue this "Countdown to the Cross," before I read today's passage, once again from John 18, let me give you the setting. It's in the early morning hours of what we have come to know as Good Friday. Jesus and His disciples have celebrated their Last Supper in the Upper Room as a part of the Passover. In a kind of "last chance" talk, he has taught them what he has considered to be most and tenderly prayed for them as well as us in John 17.

In John 18, Jesus is betrayed by one of His own 12 disciples and then arrested. Even though outnumbered by at least 20-1, in an act of impetuous bravado, Peter draws a sword and tries to defend Jesus. He must have been a far better fisherman than a swordsman. As he wielded his sword, he cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. Jesus seems to put Peter down as he heals Malchus and tells Peter to put His sword away.

Jesus is then taken to Annas who had been a ruthless power broker for years. After the Romans had relieved him of job as high priest, his sons and then his son-in-law Caiaphas held the office bought by bribing the Romans. Almost like a mafia don, Ananas and his family had run a very lucrative racket out of the

temple, as they made pilgrims coming to offer sacrifices buy new animals. It was that injustice which angered Jesus when he drove out the money changers. They had to get rid of Jesus.

Let's read the story of how Peter denied being a follower of Jesus. John 18:15-18 and 25-27.

IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR PETER TO TELL THE STORY OF HIS DENIAL.

Again, had Peter not told this story of his denial we couldn't have possibly have known about it. It fits so well with what has gone before.

In healing the high priest's servant's ear, Jesus made certain that there wasn't a warrant out for Peter's arrest. In essence, no harm had been done. Furthermore, allowing Himself to be arrested without any kind of resistance, Jesus was deflecting the attention from the other disciples as well. If Christ's kingdom movement was to flourish after His death and resurrection, it was crucial for the disciples to be free and unencumbered by further legal proceedings. God was going to use these men along with others like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy to be heralds of hope to their world.

We must give Peter credit for the courage he displays in following Jesus. Along with young John, He is the only one of the twelve who is with Jesus in His most difficult moments. When one of my favorite Biblical writers speaks of Peter here, he refers to him as being a hero.

After being stopped at the gate of the high priest's compound, Peter gains entrance when John vouches for him. Clearly, at that moment, Annas and the corrupt religious institution is concerned with Jesus and not His followers. They are amazed that He surrendered without any trouble. They are confident that with Judas' aid their plan to get rid of Jesus was working well.

It's at this point, even though there doesn't seem to be any undue scrutiny or danger, the girl who is watching the door, asks Peter the simple question, "You are not one of his disciples, are you." We don't know her motive, but it is probably is as much out of curiosity as anything.

Peter seems to be caught off guard by her inquiry and quickly simply blurts out, "I am not." Peter's fearful denial is in vivid contrast to Jesus forthright statement about his identity to Annas.

Then in verses 25-27 as Peter tries to be inconspicuous, warming himself by the fire as he takes in what he can of the kangaroo trial Jesus is going through, he might have winced when Jesus is slapped by one of Annas' henchmen. Or, possibly his Galilean accent gave away his identity.

Next comes the second question, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" Again, even more fearfully, Peter exclaims, "I am not."

A few minutes later, there by the fire, they are joined by one of Malchus' relatives who had been present in Gethsemane when they captured Jesus. He looks closely at Peter and then challenges him by asking, "Didn't I see you there in the olive grove?"

Visibly uncomfortable and fearful, Peter, according to Matthew's Gospel, vehemently responds with curses swearing, "I am not the man."

In wonderfully dramatic fashion, just as Jesus had predicted, we are told that a rooster crowed. This could have been an actual rooster, or it could have been 3:00 a. m. when the sound went out for the changing of the Roman guard. It was also called the rooster crowing.

Luke's Gospel says at this point that Jesus, in the midst of the interrogation looked at the astonished Peter. As their eyes met, Peter remembered Jesus predicting his denial. He quickly leaves the fire, hurries outside, and runs away in tears. Peter, the courageous, realizes that he is a coward. The impetuous disciple who when Jesus asked, "Who do men say that I am?," confessed that he was the Christ, the Son of God, now denies that he even knows Jesus.

Peter must have been the one who told Luke and the others this story of his miserable failure when the pressure was the greatest. Why did he let others know the ugly details of his cowardice and denial?

PETER WANTED ALL OF US TO KNOW THAT GOD CAN STILL USE US, EVEN WHEN WE HAVE DENIED KNOWING HIM.

Just as Jesus prayed for unity for all who would come after Him at the end of John 17, and that includes us, so I believe Peter shares this story to point to a God who gives us second chances when we have failed.

After running away in grief, maybe hiding alone for a few hours or more, Peter is with the other disciples when the news of Jesus' resurrection comes to them in John 20. While we don't know for sure, I visualize them hiding behind locked doors in the same upper room where Jesus had washed their feet and hosted the Last Supper.

While Peter celebrates Jesus' resurrection and sees and talks with Him in the several resurrection appearances, there is the unspoken "elephant in the room" of his denial of Jesus in one of His worst moments on this earth. The guilt of his denial weighed heavily on Peter, gnawing at him in his waking moments and keeping him from sleeping.

It was at the wonderful breakfast on the beach in John 21 when Jesus focuses on Peter, bringing him forgiveness and a fresh, new start. We'll spend some time in that passage after Easter when we "Bask in the Light of the Resurrection." That was a crucial turning point for Peter.

The rest is history! God would take the impetuous fisherman and use him in ways beyond his wildest dreams. After the Holy Spirit came to continually indwell him at Pentecost, it was the rough-hewn Peter who preached such a masterfully convincing sermon that the people were deeply moved and 3000 of them joined their numbers.

Peter became one of the great leaders of the Early Church. In fact, he is the central figure in the first several chapters of the book of *The Acts of the Apostles*. Finally, when the pressure was on Peter in the last hours of his life, instead of denying Jesus, tradition says that he did not feel worthy to be crucified like Jesus. So Peter was crucified upside down. It was on the Rock, Peter, that Christ built His church.

Thank you, Peter, for allowing the story of your denial to be told. Your hour of greatest failure, in light of God's gracious love, has become an encouragement and challenge to us.

APPLICATION

What does this story have say to you and me, today?

First, I believe it is important to share our faith stories, even though shameful, just like Peter did. Several years ago, when I was a young pastor and my daughter, Becky, was 4 or 5, I was working feverishly on a sermon on Saturday afternoon. The week had been so busy that not only had I not had time to compose a sermon, but I hadn't spent time with Becky.

I had my papers, notes and books spread out across the kitchen table. I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to get it started. The pressure was on I was in deep, pensive thought.

Almost unbeknownst to me, Becky, who wanted to be near me came quietly into the kitchen, went to refrigerator, poured herself a glass of milk and sat inconspicuously on the other side of the table. Something caught her attention, she turned quickly and spilled her glass of milk all over my emerging sermon.

"Oh, Becky! How could you?" I shouted with an unmistakable look of anger on my face. Big tears swelled up in her big beautiful brown eyes as she quickly tried to fix what she had done. But it was useless.

Before she could run away in tears, God allowed me a grace moment, as I realized what I had just done. I was denying the truth of the sermon I was working on, entitled "Interrupted By Love." I caught her in my arms as she sobbed her apologies, held her tightly and told her that she was much more important to me than any sermon would ever be.

By the way, that story became the opening for the next day's sermon. It could have been surnamed, ""Don't cry over spilled milk." I must admit even as I remember that day more than 30 years ago, feelings of shame, guilt, and regret swell up within me. By my actions, which no one else would have known about, I was denying the very message I was going to preach.

Sound familiar? I can't speak for you, but I find myself denying that I know Christ often. I deny that I know Jesus when someone tells a racially insensitive joke and I laugh or at best remain silent. I deny Christ when I am calloused to a disaster

taking place like the tornadoes which took place in Southern Indiana. I deny Christ whenever I see someone in need and I pass that person by.

I was talking with a friend this week who had been on the Great Banquet team last weekend. He was moved by all that God did in a visible way. I asked him what difference it had made at work this week. He quickly replied that it had made a big difference. He was open in the most positive ways to sharing his faith in word and deed with his colleagues. We deny Christ when we don't let Jesus be seen and heard in us.

We deny that we are a follower of Jesus Christ when we succumb to temptation and do those things we know are wrong. We deny we are a Christ follower when we speak words of gossip or that demean someone else. We deny Christ when we hold grudges, believing we can't forgive someone has wronged us.

Do you see what I am saying? It's not those bad people out there who deny Christ like Peter. It's you and me. Only you know exactly how you have denied Him.

Aleksandr Solzennitsyn captured this idea in a way when he wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart."

As we see ourselves in Peter, denying Christ, do you see His eyes meet yours like they met Peter's eyes? If so, in genuine repentance, confess the ways and times you have denied Christ. Be thorough. Don't pass over anything. Then, are there stories of denial that you need to tell others like Peter did? Like I did today? It's so good to hear stories of faith when broken people are vulnerable with others.

Be sure of this, friends. The God who forgave Peter and gave him a second chance, wants to forgive you for the ways you have denied Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this same Christ can use you in ways beyond your dreams just

like He did Peter. God wants to make you strong in the broken places to be a herald of hope to the people in your world.