

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, March 24, 2019

Hymns: 194 – Come, Let Us To The Lord Our God; O How He Loves You And Me; 445- Open Our Eyes, Lord; 671 – I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say

Scripture: Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:54-62

Sermon Title: “and Peter...”

*Mark 14:27-31*

*Jesus said to his disciples, “All of you will reject me, as the Scriptures say: ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised to life, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”*

*Peter, spoke up, “Even if all the others reject you, I never will!”*

*Jesus said, “This very night before a rooster crows twice, you will say three times that you don’t know me.”*

*Peter replied, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never say that I don’t know you!” And all the others said the same thing.*

*Luke 22:54-62*

*Then seizing Jesus, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.”*

*But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said.*

*A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.”*

*“Man, I am not!” Peter replied.*

*About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.”*

*Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.*

Why did he pick Peter? I wonder about this. I wonder why Jesus chose, of all people, a rough-edged, bad-tempered, impulsive fisherman to be the leader of his flock. There had to be someone better prepared, better equipped, better suited to the role of Shepherd of the Sheep. But he picked Peter. Why?

The more you read the Gospels, the more you ask that question. In the Gospel of Luke, the first thing Peter is recorded as saying is an argument with Jesus. Here’s how it goes (Luke 5:1-8):

*One day as Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Peter and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.*

*When he had finished speaking, he said to Peter, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."*

*Peter answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."*

*When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.*

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Lord! I will follow you wherever you go!"*

Actually, that's not what Peter said. That's not what he said at all. What Peter actually said was, *"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"*

*"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"* It isn't a promising start. But it is an honest one. Peter gets a glimpse of just who Jesus is, and he knows all too well just who and what he himself is, and so, in honest Peter style, he blurts out, *"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"* But Jesus didn't go away. Jesus stuck with him.

Not only did Jesus stick with him, he moved right in, and Peter's home in Capernaum became Jesus' home too. But despite Jesus' proximity, Peter's rough edges remained. Peter's faith and doubt and impulsivity seemed to be in constant struggle with one another. The "walking on water" episode is a classic example (Matthew 14:25-31):

*Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

*"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."*(Impulsivity)

*"Come," he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (Faith) But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"*(Doubt)

*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"*

Faith. Doubt. Impulsivity. *“If it’s you.” “Save me.” “Why did you doubt?”* There’s Peter. That’s him. One foot walking on water, the other firmly in his mouth.

It happens time and again. One minute Peter, before all the others do, recognizes that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and Jesus is calling him Peter, the Rock; the next minute, Peter’s telling Jesus that Jesus is crazy to go to Jerusalem and run the risk of being killed, and Jesus is calling Peter, “Satan.” One minute – at the Last Supper, no less – Jesus is giving a powerful lesson on what it means to lead as a servant, and the next minute, once again, an argument breaks out. John tells us what happened (John 13:4-9):

*Jesus got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put on an apron. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his apron. When he got to Simon Peter, Peter said, “Master, you wash my feet?”*

*Jesus answered, “You don’t understand now what I’m doing, but it will be clear enough to you later.”*

*Peter persisted, “You’re not going to wash my feet—ever!”*

*Jesus said, “If I don’t wash you, you can’t be part of what I’m doing.”*

*“Master!” said Peter. “Not only my feet, then. Wash my hands! Wash my head!”*

Faith. Doubt. Impulsivity. You have to wonder if Jesus just shook his head. And the thing is, the closer we get to the heart of the story – the closer we get to the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the empty tomb – it doesn’t get better for Peter. It gets worse. We don’t get St. Peter the Hero Apostle, but Peter the failure, Peter the loser, Peter who just can’t get it right. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – all the Gospels agree.

In Matthew, the problems begin right at the Last Supper, the night Jesus was to be betrayed. It is shortly after the foot-washing episode. Peter has just made a speech about how, although everyone else may turn away, he’ll remain faithful to the end, and no sooner does he finish boasting, but Jesus tells him that before the night is out, Peter will deny having had anything to do with the whole sorry affair in the first place. Later that night, Jesus asks Peter to keep watch while Jesus prays at Gethsemane, prays so intensely he sweats drops of blood, and all Peter does is fall asleep, not once, not twice, but three times. And then comes the betrayal, just as Jesus predicted, at the end of which, we read, Peter runs away, weeping bitterly.

And that’s the last we hear of Peter in Matthew’s Gospel: *“He went outside and wept bitterly.”* That’s it; Matthew never mentions him again. Not a happy end, and not a great light in which to paint the poor fellow, but tradition has it that Peter and Matthew, despite being disciples, never were best of friends. Matthew had been a tax collector, and Peter never fully forgot (or stopped resenting) that, particularly this time of year. And who can blame him.

Luke, as we heard in our Gospel reading, tells the same “deny me three times” story Matthew does, with a heartbreaking addition. Luke mentions, almost as an aside, that as the rooster crowed the dawn, Jesus, being led from the courtyard to the council, turned and looked at Peter, and Peter at him, while the curses still echoed from the wall. Again, the same words as in Matthew: *“And Peter went outside and wept bitterly.”* You wonder whose breaking heart made the loudest noise; the heart of Jesus, or the heart of his friend, Peter, who disowned him. That’s more or less it for Peter and Luke.

John, in his Gospel, gives us a bit more to think about. In Gethsemane, when the soldiers had come to arrest Jesus, Peter pulls a sword, impulsively taking matters into his own hands, and taking the ear right off an unfortunate fellow named Malchus. Rather than commending him for fighting it out though, Jesus tells him, *“Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”* (John 18:11 NIV) Peter can’t even get that right. Later, John, relating his version of the “deny me three times” story, mentions that Peter’s third accuser is none other than a relative of the fellow who Peter struck with the sword. Peter denies it all to him as well, but rather than “going out and weeping bitterly,” Peter simply disappears from the story. John doesn’t give Peter even the dignity of remorse.

Matthew, Luke, John – all agree. All ask the question: “Why him? Why Peter? Why, Jesus, would you pick someone you knew would deny you in the end? Why stick by someone who wouldn’t stick by you?” And it is a question Peter asks too. Because remarkably enough, we have Peter’s version of the story, as told by Peter and faithfully recorded by Mark. Listen to the story retold in the first person, as Mark would have heard it from Peter himself (Mark 14:26-31):

*Jesus said to his disciples, “All of you will reject me, as the Scriptures say: ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised to life, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”*

*I, Peter, spoke up, “Even if all the others reject you, I never will!”*

*Jesus said to me, “This very night before a rooster crows twice, you will say three times that you don’t know me.”*

*But I was so sure of myself that I said, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never say that I don’t know you!” And all the others said so too.*

Now, listen as Peter continues the sad and sorry tale; place yourself at the edge of the small crowd gathered under the canopy of a Roman market place, stalls and wares cleared for the evening hours; there Peter sits, grizzled, gray, his fisherman’s hands arthritic and bent, but his back still strong, his voice still clear, his eyes like windows, looking back, seeing it all again, clouding up now with the tears of recollection; the voice, bad Latin with a Galilean accent, telling the old painful tale, as Mark would have heard it from the old man himself:

*While I, Peter, was still in the courtyard, a servant girl of the high priest came up and saw me warming myself by the fire. She stared at me and said, "You were with Jesus from Nazareth!"*

*I replied, "That isn't true! I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have any idea what you mean." I went out to the gate, and a rooster crowed.*

*The servant girl saw me again and said to the people standing there, "This man is one of them!"*

*"No, I'm not!" I replied.*

*A little while later some of the people said to me, "You certainly are one of them. You're a Galilean!"*

*This time I began to curse and swear, "I don't even know the man you're talking about!"*

*Right away the rooster crowed a second time. Then I remembered that Jesus had told me, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will say three times that you don't know me." So ran out. I ran away. And I started crying and crying.*

"Write it down," he says to Mark, "Every word. Write it down." And Mark writes. Mark writes as Peter talks on, Mark catches up as Peter stops now and then to wipe his eyes, blow his nose, clear his throat with a drink. Mark's pen fills the parchment with the words of those last hours – the sham trial, the flogging, the crucifixion, the lot – and we, on the edge of the crowd, completely drawn in, at one with the story, listen to how it all ends. The old man called Peter sits up straight, closes his eyes, clears his throat, and tells the final chapter (Mark 16:1-8):

*When the women arrived at the tomb, they saw that the stone had already been rolled away. And it was a huge stone!*

*The women went into the tomb, and on the right side they saw a young man in a white robe sitting there. They were alarmed.*

*The man said, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus from Nazareth, who was nailed to a cross. God has raised him to life, and he isn't here. You can see the place where they put his body. Now go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that he will go ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you."*

*When the women ran from the tomb, they were confused and shaking all over. They were too afraid to tell anyone what had happened.*

Peter opens his eyes, tears flowing freely now, not only his, but those around the crowd – maybe yours, maybe mine – and he says it again, the most important line in his whole story, in his whole life: *"Now go and tell his disciples – and Peter - that you will see him. That he will meet you there."*

Go tell his disciples. *“And Peter.”* Why, *“and Peter?”* Because, more than anyone else in the world, Peter needed to hear. More than anyone else in the world, Peter needed to hear that there was another chance, that the last word Jesus heard wasn't a denial, the last look a betrayal, the last memory, a broken heart. More than anyone else in the world, Peter needed to hear that Jesus remembered him, loved him, lived again. Faithful, doubting, impulsive Peter, whose last day with Jesus consisted of arguing with him, making rash boasts and promises, falling asleep – asleep of all things! - on him in his hour of need, waking up only to pull out a sword and engage in the violence Jesus had always deplored, and then – and then – denying him, once, twice, three times, before running, running away - more than anyone else, anyone in the world, Peter needed to know there were second chances; more than anyone else, in this, the darkest moment, Peter needed to know there was love. That while he may have given up on Jesus, Jesus never gave up on him.

*“Go tell his disciples – and Peter.”* Maybe you know a little of what Peter was feeling, here. Maybe you can identify with this most human of men. Maybe, like for Peter, faith and doubt are in tension within your heart, your soul, with doubt often winning the race. Maybe, at times, like Peter, your best intentions seem so often and always to turn to dust. Maybe, like Peter, your rash promises go so often unfulfilled; maybe, when others needed you, you were asleep at the switch; maybe, like Peter, your own solutions to problems so often only make things worse; maybe you, too, avoid mirrors, afraid of looking yourself in the eye; maybe you, too, can identify with Peter, as you blow it one more time, and then find yourself running, running away. Maybe you; maybe me; maybe as much or more than anyone else in the world; maybe we need to know there are second chances, need to know there is someone who won't give up on us; need to know there is love. And so the words of Jesus are words for faithful, doubting, impulsive us: *“Go tell his disciples – and Peter – and Don, and Cathy, and Gary, and Susan, and Roger, and Sandra, and John – and you, and me... go tell them, I will be with them, I will not leave them lost. Go tell his disciples. And Peter.”*

And Mark puts down his pen, and Peter, the old fisherman, stands up, blows his nose, smiles through the tears, and makes his way through the crowd, embracing, one by one, those who heard the story, those who made it theirs. And as he – as Peter – embraces you, embraces me, he says these words: *“You might give up on him. He'll never give up on you. If he could love me – me – he can love you. And he'll never stop. He'll never give up on you.”*

*“If he could love me – me – he can love you.”* And he does. He does. He does love you. And he'll never stop. He'll never give up on you. Let's love him right back. And never stop. Amen.