

## Failures and Faithfulness: Peter's Denial

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 2, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 26: 69-75

I think most of you know the story of George Washington and the Cherry Tree. Of all the stories that we tell about our forefathers, it's one of the most popular and widely known. It's so widely known that even a boy who grew up in Canada (like me!) can tell it to you. As the story goes, when George Washington was six years old his Father gave him the gift of a hatchet. Young George loved his new gift and was eager to use it. Unfortunately, he decided to use it by cutting down his father's favorite Cherry Tree. His Father soon discovered the fallen tree. "Who did this terrible thing?" he cried. Young George responded: "I cannot tell a lie, father, you know I cannot tell a lie! I did cut it with my little hatchet." The anger drained from his father's face, and taking the boy tenderly in his arms, he said: "My son, that you should not be afraid to tell the truth is more to me than a thousand trees! Even if they should be blossomed with silver and had leaves of the purest gold!"

It's a great story. Unfortunately, it almost certainly never happened. The story isn't told anywhere until after Washington's death. It first appears in Parson Weems collection of stories, and then only in the fifth edition. I'm sure George Washington was an honest man, and the story teaches a good lesson, but it's a legend.

It's also a good example of what we humans love to do when we tell stories of our founders, the people who established the country we love, or the school we love, or the sports team we love. We tell stories of their industry, their character, their excellence. Sometimes these stories are true, and sometimes they are embellished, and sometimes they are completely manufactured. But they all serve the same purpose to remind us of the diligence, the excellence, the sacrifice of our forbearers, so that we might go and do likewise.

Thinking about that human tendency makes the story we just read even more remarkable. Is Peter a founding figure of the Christian faith? Absolutely. I don't think any of us would argue with that statement. The book of Acts clearly identifies Peter as the pre-eminent leader of the early Church. Is this passage a central story of Peter's biblical biography? Yes. It's probably the best known Peter story in the bible. But it is a completely different kind of story from the story of the Cherry tree. It is the opposite kind of story. It is not a story of character and strength and excellence; it is a story of complete failure.

And it's a story that Peter probably tells on himself. Think about it: based on Matthew's account, how would the church know this story? Who was there to witness the denial? Who was there to see Peter's failure? Jesus might have been there, and he obviously knew it happened, but I don't think Jesus would have been the one to tell the others what Peter did. Somehow I can't see Jesus saying, "Hey Matthew come here, you won't believe what Peter did!" No, Peter probably told this story. It was probably Peter. Peter gathering his fellow believers and saying, with his voice shaking. "Guys sit down for a second, I have something I have to tell you." And then telling them the whole sordid story.

And it is sordid. The way Matthew tells the story gives you a sense of just how completely Peter fails. Each of Peter's denials is a little worse. He digs himself a little deeper with each one. In the first denial, when the servant girl wonders if Peter was with Jesus, Peter says, "I don't know what you are talking about." Notice that Peter is playing truth games with this answer. He's doing that thing where we don't want someone to catch us in a lie, but we don't want them to know the truth. So rather than saying, 'no I wasn't with Jesus,' Peter says: I don't know what you are talking about. He acts as if he doesn't understand the question. Which gives him an out if he's ever confronted: "I didn't say I didn't know Jesus, I just had a hard time understanding what she was saying!"

After he puts off the first servant girl he moves from his spot where another servant girl claims to have seen him with Jesus. This time he explicitly denies knowing Jesus. "I don't know the man!" he says. He also denies with an oath. Matthew doesn't record the oath, but presumably Peter said something like, "I swear by the holy tabernacle itself, I don't know the man." Obviously the denial is a problem, but if you know your Bible, you know the oath is a problem too. What did Jesus say about oaths? He said don't make them. Matthew 5:34. 'Don't swear oaths! Just let your yes be yes and your no be no.' As Peter followed Jesus and heard him teach the crowds I'm sure he heard Jesus give this command dozens of times. So Peter is not only denying Jesus; he's denying Jesus in a way that flies in the face of everything Jesus had taught him.

Finally, the third denial. This time it's not a servant girl; this time it's a group of people who confront him, and this time Peter's denial is the strongest yet. He begins calling down curses and he swears to them, "I don't know the man." What does it mean that Peter was calling down curses? Who was he cursing? Probably he was calling down curses upon himself. In some of the Psalms you have examples of people who pronounce self-imprecations as a way to prove their truthfulness. Psalm 7 for example, "Lord if there is blood on my hands may my enemy overtake me, let him trample my life to the ground." Peter probably did something like that: "I don't know the man, and if I am not telling the truth may the ground swallow me up! May God strike me with lightning!" Obviously this is as about a strong a denial as you can make.

And maybe it reminds you of something else Jesus said. What did Jesus say about denying him before others? Matthew 10:33 "Whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in Heaven." When Peter denies Jesus before this whole group he is committing a damnable offense. No wonder Peter leaves weeping bitterly. This is not a story of a couple of white lies that Peter tells to get himself out of a tight spot; it's a story of complete and utter failure.

It's amazing that this story survived. Even though he had power in the early church, Peter doesn't suppress the story, he doesn't shine it up to make himself look a little better; he lets the whole sordid story be told. And told in all four gospels! Obviously the Holy Spirit really wants us to hear this story, because Peter's ugly failure shows up in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Why is the Holy Spirit so eager for us to see Peter's failure? There are a couple of reasons I think. First, there are things we can learn from watching Peter. Watching Peter teaches us something about the location of our spiritual battles. We all know that Peter was something of a romantic. He loved to make big promises. He loved to make bold gestures. "Even if all the others abandon you, even if I have to die for you, Jesus I will never leave you!" That's how a person talks when they are a romantic about their faith. "Lord if the soldiers of unbelief ever show up at my door and point their guns at me and command me to renounce my faith, I shall look them in the eye and say, Jesus is my Lord!" When Peter imagines the fight against evil, he imagines these glorious all or nothing moments when he can show his courage and quality.

But the battle between good and evil almost never looks like that. Who trips up Peter in the first two denials. Is it an enemy soldier? A menacing high priest? A Jesus-hating Pharisee? No, it's a servant girl. A simple servant girl. A person without power or education. And does she call Peter to renounce his faith or does she threaten him in any way? No. She just asks if Peter was with Jesus. It's a question, not an accusation or a threat. It turns out that it didn't take a crafty and powerful tempter to send Peter spiraling down in denial; all it took was a servant girl asking questions.

The great struggles against evil do not take place on dramatic stages with obvious foes. The places where your faith is tested are quotidian places, ordinary places. The conversation at work. The choices we make with the TV remote. The places we scroll on our phones or browse on our computers. The battle is engaged at your kitchen table, at your work desk, behind the wheel of your car. It's in these ordinary places where the tempter comes after us.

The flip side is also true. It's not just ordinary things that can trip us up; it's small ordinary places where we can do the most good for God and his Kingdom. Again, when we think of the battle between good and evil our mind often runs toward the big stuff; the decisions made by powerful people in high places. We think of culture war type struggles. And certainly those struggles are real and they matter. But is it possible for our fixation on culture war issues to distract us from opportunities for doing good that are right at hand? Maybe instead of reading that really important article on your phone about that big issue, that article which is getting you all worked up, maybe the really important thing you need to do is put down your phone or your iPad and call your friend, or talk to your spouse, or say to your kid, 'Hey, let's take the dog for a walk.' Maybe we need to spend less time reading online articles and more time loving the people who are right in front of us. Loving our neighbors. Talking with them. Listening to them. Don't get me wrong, attention to the big issues of the world is important; but most of what changes people's hearts and minds happens when people love each other well in ordinary places.

So that's one reason the story of Peter's denial is featured prominently: so we can learn from his failure and avoid his mistakes. But that's not the most important reason. The Holy Spirit makes this terrible failure a foundation story for Peter as a way to remind us that the church is different. We are a different kind of community. We are defined by a different kind of power, a different kind of success, a different kind of hope.

We have a different foundation. We are a community that says failure is a part of all of our stories. It's part of our story as individuals. It's part of our story as a community. This story along with other failure stories in this series tells us, no matter how good our intentions, no matter how earnest and hardworking we might be, left to our own devices, like Peter we will fail.

That's not all the Bible has to say about us. The Bible doesn't say, you are failures, end of story. The Bible says a lot of wonderful things about human beings. We are made in the image of God. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are God's workmanship, his handiwork. We are made a little lower than the angels. The Bible is full of glorious superlatives about human beings, but in the midst of all those glorious superlatives is this one tragic truth, this one awful reality: left to our own devices we will fall flat on our face and all our pious intentions, all our big talk, will come crashing to the ground.

With all these foundational failure stories, you might think that the Bible would be a dark and depressing book, but it's not. It's a work of gospel hope. Because even as Peter is failing miserably under the questioning of a couple of servant girls, in the very next room, at the very same time, Jesus is enduring the accusations of the High Priest, the threats of the Sanhedrin, the mockery of the people, the spit and slaps of soldiers; all the while staying faithful to his task, which is to give up his life for the sake of all the failures of the world. Remember that Jesus said, "Whoever disowns me, I will disown him?" Peter completely disowns Jesus, but here, at the moment of failure, Peter is not disowned. Instead Jesus dies for him. And who ends up feeling like he's being disowned? Jesus. "My God my God, why have you forsaken me." Peter should have been the one saying that; instead it's Jesus. And instead of casting Peter out of his presence, after his resurrection, Jesus restores Peter.

That's why this story of failure is put at the center of the story, that's why the Bible is full of these failure stories, because through these stories, we learn the truth of ourselves. These stories show us our true identity. Here's the truth: You are not a success. You are not a failure. You are a child of God saved by grace.

I think I may have mentioned this years ago in a sermon, but years ago my old church, Woodlawn CRC, wanted to adopt a tagline for the community. A tagline is a phrase that quickly summarizes the mission of an institution. Some people were suggesting things like: Woodlawn CRC: A Family of Disciples. Or: Woodlawn CRC: Loving Jesus; Loving our Neighbors. Things like that. My favorite idea was the one submitted by my friend Dick Houskamp. Woodlawn CRC: A Bunch of Ornery Cusses Saved by Grace. I think that would have looked great on our stationary.

See you laughed when I said that. Everyone laughs when they hear that story. So did Woodlawn people. They laughed even though the tagline calls them failures! Ornery cusses!! Why did they laugh at being called ornery cusses? They laughed because they knew it was true; they were ornery cusses, but even though it was true that truth is small and fleeting beside the enormous life giving grace poured out in Jesus. We laugh because, when we see God's grace and the height of it and the depths of it and the strength of it, our failure doesn't seem like an impossible weight, it seems like a light and momentary trouble that will be swept away by the God's amazing grace.

People of LaGrave: You are not successes. You are not failures. You are a bunch of ornery cusses saved by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

©Rev. Peter Jonker