



UNDONE

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 22:54–62

80th Message

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When it was time for my youngest child to get her driver's license we drove to DMV for the driving test. When the agent came out, she asked Annie for a particular hand signal. The question was not anticipated and took us both by surprise. We both panicked with a sinking feeling of being in the spotlight and not knowing what to do. My daughter didn't know the answer and since I was nearby she looked at me. I didn't know the answer either but I took my best guess and tried to discreetly give her a signal. Yes, I was trying to cheat. The agent saw what we were doing and we were toast. We were exposed and embarrassed. The agent told me to go inside and my daughter was disqualified. For the second attempt at getting the license we went to a different DMV office.

Our text today deals with the human dynamics of fear, anxiety, panic, and awkwardness when questioned unexpectedly, when we are put on the spot in a pressure filled situation. However, the situation in our text is far more serious than a driver's license. I am referring to the scene when Peter is called to give an account of his faith but denies being associated with Jesus, a drama that is related in all four gospels.

Two weeks ago we began the passion narrative in Luke's gospel that began after the Passover meal and this will be our focus for the next several weeks, setting our gaze on the suffering of Jesus. Quite appropriately this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the time when the church traditionally has contemplated Christ's suffering. Thus our studies in Luke are timely. However, our text today is more focused on Peter. Let's look first at the account and then at each of the characters involved. We begin at verse 22:54.

The Setting

Then they seized him (Jesus) and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. (Luke 22:54–55 ESV)

Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples and then went out into the night to Gethsemane to pray. There a crowd of chief priests, temple soldiers, and elders, led by Judas the betrayer, confronted him. They came out into the dark night with swords and clubs. We read here that they seized him, led him away, and took him to the high priest's house. Luke's use of multiple verbs emphasizes dramatic action.

Luke does not tell us whether the house that they took Jesus to belonged to Annas or Caiaphas. We know from John 18 that there was an initial inquiry at Annas' house and then a longer questioning that took place at Caiaphas' house. Caiaphas was the actual high priest, but Annas, his father-in-law, had enormous influence. He was the high priest from AD 6-15, when he was deposed by Gratus, Pilate's predecessor. Five of Annas' sons and now his son-in-law Caiaphas held the office of high priest at one time or another. Thus the high priesthood was a family affair and Annas was the patriarch of the

family. Many considered Annas to be the real high priest. Luke links these two together in chapter 3:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (Luke 3:1–2)

And again we see the same idea in Acts 4:

On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. (Acts 4:5–6)

When Jesus is taken to the high priest's house Peter follows, but he follows at a safe distance. This is the same Peter who, when told by Jesus that Satan would sift him like wheat responded by saying, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." (Luke 22:33) This is the same Peter who cut off the servant's ear in the garden. But now his boldness has turned to fear.

Peter enters into the courtyard of the high priest's home. Most significant homes were built around an open courtyard. The arresting group builds a fire to stay warm. Peter sits down among them. Jesus was most likely in the house or separate from this group being questioned. Three people make comments about Peter's association with Jesus.

First Denial

Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." (Luke 22:56–57)

The first to speak is a servant girl. John describes this girl as the doorkeeper. Mark says that she is the high priest's servant. All four gospels have her commenting first. She is not a man or a person in authority and therefore someone who would have posed no threat to Peter in a normal situation.

The fire illuminates Peter's face. The servant girl looks closely at Peter, meaning that she looked intently and intensely. The girl recognizes Peter and comments that he also was with Jesus. Peter denies what she has said.

Second Denial

And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." (Luke 22:58)

The second to speak is a man, although Mark has the same servant girl speaking. Luke comments that it is a little later. Matthew and Mark mention that Peter moved to the porch or gateway. Peter is wilting. The man accuses Peter of being one of them, i.e. a follower or disciple of Jesus. Peter denies any association with Jesus and the disciples.

Third Denial

And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean."

But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.”
(Luke 22:59–60a)

The third comment comes about an hour later from a man who John tells us is a servant of the high priest and a relative of the man whose ear was cut off by Peter. He insists that certainly or truthfully Peter was with Jesus. The evidence is that Peter is a Galilean, identifiable by either his dress or his accent. Again, Peter denies any association with Jesus. We might note that in each response Peter addresses the person with a vocative that identifies the gender of the one speaking—woman, man, man.

The word “deny” in verse 57 means to challenge or dispute. But it is also connected to the idea of apostasy and unfaithfulness. The motive for denial is fear, fear as to what others will do or think. The opposite of denial is to be faithful or to hold fast. We see these ideas in Jesus’ words to the church in Pergamum in Rev. 2:

I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (Rev. 2:13)

The Rooster Crows

And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:60b–62)

Before Peter could even finish speaking, a rooster crows. The word “immediately” is a favorite term of Luke’s; it occurs ten times in the gospel. My many trips to Mexico and living in a small Mayan village in the Yucatan for a week make me very familiar with the early morning sound of a rooster. They start about 4:00 in the morning and go until full sunlight.

When the rooster crows Jesus turns and looks at Peter. Jesus may have been on the move to Caiaphas’ house at this point, although Matthew and Mark have a slightly different order. Peter’s heart sinks, for what Jesus had told him at the last supper now comes to pass.

Surely Peter remembers what Jesus had said previously:

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:8–9)

Peter is undone, cut to the quick. Filled with guilt and shame he leaves, goes out of the courtyard, and weeps bitterly. This is not a silent cry but rather intense, violent, uncontrollable sobbing that happens when one experiences the onset of sharp, agonizing pain.

Most of you are very familiar with this story. What I would like to do is reflect on the various characters in Luke’s account: Jesus, the servants, and Peter.

Jesus

Jesus is silent but has a powerful role. His only action in the scene is to turn and look at Peter when he hears the rooster crow. Luke is the only gospel that mentions this. Rembrandt painted the picture you see on the screen that captures this moment. Jesus is in the background with hands tied, looking over his shoulder at Peter.

The question is, how does Jesus look at Peter? Does he look at him with anger or accusation? Is he gloating over the fact that he was right? Is he exalting himself because he is the only one who is faithful? Or is Jesus looking at Peter with the eyes of love?

I believe the look is the look of love. It is the same look that Jesus gave to the rich young man in Mark 10:

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21).

Jesus is now alone, humanly speaking. Most of the disciples have run off and abandoned him. One disciple has betrayed him and now another denies him. Jesus is undergoing inquisition and is facing imminent death and yet he still has the capacity to be other-centered. In the midst of his own suffering he has eyes to see what is happening to others. He knew what Peter would do and yet his eyes are full of compassion.

George Herbert wrote a poem entitled “The Glance” about God’s “sweet and gracious eye” and the “strange delight” he experienced as God looked upon him when he was “weltring in sin.” Herbert goes on to reflect on the many occasions when bitter and potentially destructive storms came upon him but he was able to experience the “sweet original joy” that “sprung from thine eye” and worked “within my soul.” And finally he reflects upon experiencing the look of God when he would see him face to face:

If thy first glance so powerful be,
A mirth but opened and sealed up again’
What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see
Thy full-eyed love!¹

When Jesus looked at Peter he looked at him with full-eyed love. Do you realize that at your worst moment or in deepest failure God did not see you with anger or accusation or disappointment but was looking at you with full-eyed love?

My college years in the late sixties were troublesome and often filled with darkness. It was a very confusing time with the Vietnam War and changing values in society. Many young people were completely unanchored. In my mind’s eye I often go to Lincoln, Nebraska and it is easy to see myself during those years, but with eyes of disappointment, wishing I had done better, been better, and made better use of those years. Part of my own spiritual journey has been to recognize that God even then was looking at me with full-eyed love. God’s love was always there; it was always prior. I was pre-loved by God. This is a very powerful, transformative, and healing thought for me.

Most of us, if not all of us, have had some dark moments in our lives. But we can be healed by imagining God looking at us with eyes of love and tenderness even in times of failure or darkness. God allows us to go through these times. He knows what we will do just like he did with Peter, but that does not change his compassion towards us. He looks at us with full-eyed love.

The Servants

There are three servants that speak to Peter, a woman and two men by Luke’s account. At least one of the men might actually be a temple guard. We might note that none of the three ask Peter questions but rather make statements. We tend to read these statements as accusations especially in light of Peter’s defensive responses. The servants may be seeking to expose him to the authorities and wanting him to hang with

Jesus. This is the obvious conclusion but maybe we shouldn't be so quick to judge. Even if they are accusatory perhaps one or more of the three want to engage Peter in a conversation.

Late in his turbulent life Caravaggio painted the denial of Peter, the painting you see on the screen. There are three figures: Peter, the woman, and a guard. As some of you know Caravaggio was a master of light and dark. This painting is rather dark except for the light shining on Peter's face and on the eyes and forehead of the woman.

This painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and it is the favorite painting of a particular art reporter for the New York Times. Whenever he goes to the museum he stops by and gazes at the painting. For him the woman has caught his attention and has become the central character. He comments that "her eyes seem to have come unfocused, and she's not looking at the guard she is facing but looking momentarily inward...it is the maid's hesitation and humanity in the moment of accusation that, to me, now remain as the painting's subject and its power."²

I don't want to read a painting into the biblical text but the painting and the article that this reporter wrote has caused me to reflect more on the three servants than I normally would have. I no longer dismiss them as unimportant and no longer see them as hard-hearted accusers but as frail human beings looking for answers.

Many times people will make comments about Jesus or our belief in Jesus in a derogatory and accusing manner. They may use a loud voice or harsh words, "I can't stand born-again Christians." Immediately a wall goes up between us and the other person. We ignore them, change the subject, or respond with our own harsh words.

May I suggest another approach? Rather than deflecting, ignoring, judging, or panicking might we engage another person as Jesus often does with questions or comments: "Your comment sounds like you have had a painful religious experience. I would love to hear about it." "I wonder if you are curious or confused about the nature of God or the person of Jesus. I would love to talk about it."

I know these situations can be awkward and emotional, especially when they involve a close friend or family member. But rather than thinking about our own uneasiness or hurt feelings we might be more other-centered. I would challenge us to look at people not only in church but also in the world with full-eyed love, realize that they might have a great deal of pain, and respond in a different way than we might normally do.

Peter

Finally, there is Peter—outspoken, impetuous, foot-in-the-mouth Peter. At the moment of testing he caves and wants to save his own skin. Most of us can identify with Peter and his failure. There is a lot of Peter in all of us. We shrink under pressure. We become fearful and anxious. We deny our faith in words or actions.

It is very interesting that the first mention of Peter in Luke's gospel occurs in chapter 5, when Peter, James, and John had come up empty after a night of fishing. Jesus told these men to put their nets into the water and they were quickly filled with a huge catch of fish. "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'" (Luke 5:8)

It seems that Peter has not made much progress, despite being with Jesus for three years and seeing amazing miracles, including the

transfiguration. When Peter and Jesus' eyes meet Peter is filled with shame and guilt and sorrow. The other disciples had fled but he alone has overtly denied Jesus. The awareness of his utter depravity pierces Peter's heart. As one poet writes, he "denied the one true life."³ But what cuts deeper than the guilt is the look in Jesus' eyes. Peter cannot stand the full-eyed love he sees so he runs out into the night, weeping uncontrollably. Once again he mutters to himself: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. I am a despicable, worthless failure." Have you ever been undone by suddenly seeing the depth of your sin, selfishness, or pride? Have you ever wept over your failures? I know I have, on more than one occasion.

Fortunately we know that the story does not end here. We know that Jesus restores Peter on the shores of Galilee when three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, cancelling out the three-fold denial. Jesus had hinted at this restoration when he told Peter: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

Following Pentecost we see a much different Peter, one empowered by the Spirit, completely restored and redeemed, serving the Lord as he was called to do. Peter never compromised his faith again. He willingly suffered for Jesus and in the end it cost him his life. The difference maker was the Holy Spirit and the understanding of Christ's suffering. He learned that for the sake of Christ he could deny himself instead of Jesus, take up his cross, and follow his Lord (Luke 9:23).

Perhaps you think that you have said or done something so horrible, so shameful that there is no way God can redeem you. Perhaps there is a dark cloud of shame or guilt that hangs over you year after year. Perhaps you have not been faithful when tested under fire. Peter's story can be our story. The turning point in our spiritual journey is often when we fail. The worst point might be the starting point. Hitting bottom may be the way up.

We can't go back in time and fix or change what we may have done. We don't have to. The Lord is always looking to our restoration, not at our failures. We can be restored and live lives of purpose and service for God. All we have to do is receive God's grace, believe that he can redeem us. That is not easy for us to do, because we want to make up for our failure. We want to do something to earn restoration. But there is nothing we can or need to do. Jesus has done it all with love. And even when a memory surfaces now and again, rather than feeling remorse or shame we can let it simply be an invitation to receive God's unending, undeserved grace and love.

*"For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning."* (Ps. 30:5)

1. George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, (Penguin Books, London, 1991), 161-162

2. Randy Kennedy, "A Painting Only You Can See", no pages. Cited February, 2015. Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/arts/design/caravaggio-denial-of-st-peter-met-museum-of-art.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>

3. M.A. Peel, "Good Friday: Saint Peter's Worst Day", no pages. Cited February 2015. Online: <http://mapeel.blogspot.com/2012/04/good-friday-saint-peters-worst-day.html>

