

Sifting Simon
Maundy Thursday Meditation
March 29, 2018
Selections for Luke 22

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times.'
Luke 22:61

Our reading from Luke 22 ended with Jesus saying to Peter, calling him by his given name, Simon, and using repetition of his name, which is a Hebrew form of intimacy ... *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."* Two quick things to note: as you can see in the pew Bible footnote, the first "you" used by Jesus is a plural you. If we were from Alabama rather than Rhode Island, we'd have no trouble understanding this; this is the Greek equivalent of "y'all." *"Simon, Simon! Satan has asked to test all of you, all y'all, all of my disciples, all of my followers, as a farmer sifts the wheat from the chaff ... throwing it up into the wind, crashing it against the grate, shaking it, and otherwise doing what it takes to see what is genuine."* What is intimated is that all disciples of Jesus will have their faith sifted, tested, shaken down to see if it's genuine; Satan has apparently given permission and power to do that. However, while being given permission to sift, he has neither permission nor power to *shift* you; only we can choose to *shift* our allegiance away from our Lord. As Jesus continues, He uses the singular "you." *"But I prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."* We know now from the perspective of history that Jesus' prayer for Simon was answered.

Simon was the very first to acknowledge and confess Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God; those of us who visited the Holy Land last February will remember he did that at Caesarea-Philippi, north of Galilee; I was privileged to read that familiar story to you all at that site. Jesus had affirmed Simon for that confession, telling him, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."* Jesus had honored Simon by giving him this new name, almost as an affectionate nickname. *"You are Peter, the Rock ... the original Rocky."*

On this night of the Last Supper, we are told by John that Jesus said, *"Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."* Peter had responded, *"Why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!"* And Peter meant it. Peter was so committed to Jesus. Later this night, when Judas came to the garden with the detachment of soldiers and officials from the chief priests, Peter went fearlessly charging into the crowd with his sword flailing slicing off the ear of one of the high priest's servants (*we are told by John the servant's name was Malchus*) ... until Jesus stopped him. Jesus healed the servant, and then was then arrested and taken across the Kidron Valley to the home of the high priest; we were able to visit that site, as well. Apparently, Peter followed that arresting party; we are told he was outside in the courtyard of the high priest's home warming himself by the fire, alongside some of the very people who had just dragged Jesus out of the garden. You can be sure they knew who he was ... they wouldn't forget the face of someone who just came at them with a sword, slicing off the ear of one of their number. I'm sure they were giving him a wide berth! It should be obvious he certainly wasn't *afraid* of these people, or he wouldn't have been there.

As John tells the story, a woman who was there asked, *"You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?"* Peter said, *"I am not."* Peter then denied being a disciple a second time, and a third time ... then the cock crowed. Remember, Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest's home, and Jesus is inside the home suffering this mockery of a trial. And now, a detail recorded only by the gospel of Luke. After the third denial, Luke tells us, *"the Lord turned and looked at Peter."* Although at a bit of a distance, Jesus locked eyes with Peter at that exact moment of Peter's third denial; that was Peter's last contact with Jesus before the crucifixion. We are then told Peter wept, and wept bitterly; the bitterness of Peter's tears is magnified by this detail recorded only by Luke.

Now, why did Peter deny he was a disciple? Some of you here this evening have heard me speculate on this before, but not all. Contrary to the judgment of many throughout history, I *don't* think it was because he was a coward. Again, I've talked about this in years past, but the review won't hurt. There is just no evidence *anywhere* in the Gospels Peter was a coward! Peter really was willing to risk his life for Jesus. This was the same Peter who was the only one bold enough to step out of the boat to attempt walking on a stormy, raging

sea in order to respond to Jesus' call. And he's standing around this fire with the very people who had just dragged Jesus out of the garden, people he had just engaged in a swordfight. This isn't a coward! No, I don't think Peter denied being a disciple because of his fear. I think he denied he was a disciple because of his *integrity*. For at the moment, he was confessing the truth, the truth as he saw it.

"Are you a disciple?" he is asked. "No! I am not, I am not, I am not a follower of Jesus ... not anymore." To Peter, all was lost. It was finished. He just couldn't follow Him, now, not this far. And this disciple knew that if you stop following Jesus Christ, then by definition you are no longer a disciple. If you are not following Jesus, you are not His disciple. (*Just a quick aside about other translations that have Peter saying "I don't know him." The word "know" can carry the nuance of "understand," as if to say, "I don't understand him. Not anymore." Seen in this sense,, Peter is telling the truth.*)

He knew Jesus was going to the cross. And he would not follow Him there. After all, what would be the point? It would be fruitlessly suicidal. So, when he realized he was not being a disciple, **he had the integrity to say so**. Peter literally thought this was a dead end. He saw no reason for hope. And when you see no reason for hope, all that is left is despair and grief about what might have been; so Peter grieved, and grieved bitterly, as his eyes locked with his Lord's eyes one last time. After the resurrection, though, I'm sure Jesus words resounded in Peter's memory: "*Where I am going, you cannot follow now ... but you will follow later.*" Earlier, before the resurrection, Peter had no reference point for hope, no reference point for understanding and believing in any hope or life beyond the darkness of betrayal and death, beyond the darkness of the cross. Prior to the resurrection, all seemed lost; so it did not make sense to follow Jesus any longer; it would, in fact, be fruitless and even suicidal. Again, what would be the point? However, *after* the resurrection, it would all make sense.

Peter was **sifted**, but I believe he never **shifted** (*left out of the spoken sermon, but in my notes was, "He was tested, but not bested!"*) What Peter couldn't understand earlier was that overcoming evil would mean Jesus death. But as Peter found out with absolute certainty, the story does not end with the darkness of the cross. Peter and the others would indeed follow Him "later"; in fact, all of the disciples were indeed sifted, and, except for Judas, all would go on to follow Jesus to the point of their own deaths. As Jesus knew, there would be an hour coming when He would be raised from the dead. He knew there was an ultimate happy ending. That was how He could face the darkness. When we are on our way to a cross, when our faith is being sifted, we have to keep a vision of the resurrection in front of us, as well.

One last thought: This is the same Peter who later wrote, "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never fade – kept in heaven for you ... in this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*" (from 1 Peter 1)

From the worship bulletin for Maundy Thursday:

*INVITATION TO THE TABLE

(from the Book of Common Worship, c. 1993)

On this day, Christ gathered with His disciples in the upper room.

On this day, Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

On this day, Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may here proclaim His holy sacrifice and be partakers of His resurrection, and at the last day may reign with Him in heaven.

And on this day, Christ the Lamb of God gave Himself into the hands of those who would slay Him.

*CALL TO WORSHIP

(from Isaiah 53:4-6)

Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted.

BUT HE WAS PIERCED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS, HE WAS CRUSHED FOR OUR INIQUITIES; THE PUNISHMENT THAT BROUGHT US PEACE WAS UPON HIM, AND BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;

AND THE LORD HAS LAID ON HIM THE INIQUITY OF US ALL.