

February 25, 2018 “The Peter Principle” John 18:12-18, 25-28

This morning as a congregation we turn our attention to the agenda of what we call the season of Lent. We focus our attention on those things that happened in a very short time period (less than 48 hours) leading up to and through the actual crucifixion of Jesus. And I want to say something that you will not often hear, nor will you find mentioned in many books. The historical soundness of the details of the crucifixion, and the gospel accounts are better attested in ancient records than are the details of the existence of individuals like Julius Caesar or even Napoleon. In other words, in discussing the crucifixion of Jesus there is no question. We are dealing with facts.

John was an eye witness, as was Peter. Jesus was arrested in the Garden called Gethsemane. A detachment of soldiers, their commander and the Jewish officials sent by the High Priest, Caiaphas, supervised the arrest. There were a number of surprises. In other words it did not go as smoothly or as easily as was planned. Jesus asked the party carrying torches, lanterns and weapons who they were looking for. They said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus identified himself. Judas, Jesus disciple accompanied the arresting party. Jesus made the request, surrendering himself, that HIS disciples be allowed to walk away.

It was at that moment that Peter, who was carrying a hidden weapon, drew his sword, struck the servant of the High Priest, a man named Malchus, cutting off his right ear. It is Luke the doctor, and the chronicler of healing miracles, who tells us (as does John) that Jesus took charge, stopped the potential for a major fight from breaking out, and tells us what John skips over...that Jesus touched Malchus and healed his wound, and restored the man's ear.

So they bound Jesus, and took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law to Caiaphas, the high priest. As they took Jesus away, Peter and John (John was the “other disciple” mentioned in the text)... they followed the arresting party at what would be a safe distance, and under cover of darkness. When they arrived at the home of Caiaphas, John was able to go into the courtyard of the house, because he was known to the High Priest. Peter remained outside, unable to pass through security. John gets permission and goes back outside, speaks to the girl (that's interesting, who is guarding the door) and is allowed to bring Peter into the courtyard as well. To this day... representatives of the government of Israel, and the Ministry of tourism are able to identify that house, that courtyard, and the cistern they used as a holding cell for Jesus through the balance of the night.

In the morning, they led Jesus from Caiaphas house to the home of Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. The reason they took Jesus to Pilate was that as an occupied territory belonging to the Emperor, no one in the Jewish system of authority, had the power to order an execution. They did not want Jesus to be jailed. They wanted Jesus to be executed. Only Pontius Pilate could legally give that order. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem was, committed to securing that order and participating in its being carried out. Let me be clear. The Romans would have to rule that Jesus was under order of execution.

Roman soldiers would have to carry out the execution. The Sanhedrin, or their representatives would be present as witnesses to be sure Jesus died. That is simply....the process.

Let us return to the courtyard at the house of Caiaphas. At first glance it would appear that John has made a tactical mistake in bringing Peter inside the door, that bars the way to the courtyard. People almost immediately begin to recognize the big fisherman. There was a fire in the courtyard...the nights are cool...Peter drifted over to the fire to get warm, and in its light the first question is asked. "Tell me...you are not one of his disciples are you?" Peter says, "Nope!" Here is an insight. There is tension on both sides. Fear of trouble on the part of the authorities, fear for safety, on the part of the disciples of Jesus. It is not easy to be in the midst of the camp of what Peter regards, as the enemy. It is tense. There is anxiety and fear on both sides. The representatives of the Sanhedrin are not comfortable about having to work with the Romans to gain their desired conclusion. They understand these negotiations are going to be delicate.

And then a little later a relative of Malchus who works for the High Priest, and was there at the arrest in the Garden fingers Peter. "Didn't I see you in the olive grove with HIM (that is, with Jesus). And again Peter denies. As a matter of fact three times Peter was accosted by individuals who were suspicious if not certain they had recognized Peter as a follower of Jesus. After the question by this relative of Malchus, John tells us the rooster crowed. Luke provides two more details, that make the moment even more dramatic. The rooster crows. And Jesus turns, I'm quoting Luke word for word, "the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." Their eyes meet. Peter knows, that Jesus knows what has just happened. And Peter can't take any more. He leaves the courtyard. He breaks down. He weeps bitterly for what he has done.

This is the real Peter Principle. Being a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, being known as one of those "Jesus People" is not easy. Peter is the mould. We have moments when we perform miraculously. I mean it! We know how to pray. We have learned things about the mantle of servanthood. We care for our neighbours. Even the ones we would rather not have to care about. Even the ones we disagree with, or whose lifestyles we are not comfortable with. We worship God in a time when the balance of our society cannot be bothered or think this is all nonsense. There is no question, we swim against the current, we run uphill and into the wind. We do.

There are also moments like those in the courtyard of the High Priest's house when we fail the test of devotion, when we fail the test of faithfulness, when we pretend that we are someone else. Moments when we seek safety under cover of darkness. When we want to hide. When we want our faith to be invisible. Every one of us wrestles with the burden, the challenge of discipleship. And some of us have moments when we can feel the eyes of the Lord are upon us...and HE knows the rooster just crowed, and we know that God knows we have just tried to be on both sides of the fence. With Jesus. And with the world. And some of us weep at the realization that our cover is blown.

Hear me. I say to you, I have not said these things to increase your sense of guilt or your sense of unworthiness. Jesus forgave Peter. Jesus restored Peter. Jesus died for Peter and HIS blood cleansed Peter. The same is true of you. There are several things to remember as we are tempted to weep bitterly on the outside of the courtyard of Caiaphas. Jesus understood, and Jesus understands better than we what is happening. He died for us and rose for us in spite of what we are and because of what we may become. Repent of moments that cause you to judge yourself. Embrace the Lord who forgives, makes clean and gives greater strength. As Al Hibler sang in 1954, the lyric of Richard Mullan, "Though it makes HIM sad to see the way we live, He'll always say...I forgive.

As hard as it may be for us to hear and understand, to hear and take seriously, this is what the Gospel teaches; this is why the Gospel writers wrote as they did... "He'll always say, I forgive."

Let us pray;

Lord, as we read your word, we read not just the easy to hear parts, but also those parts of the Scripture that convict us, and make us feel "guilty" of the charge of being less than faithful servants. All of us have sinned. All of us have fallen short of the mark, short of the goal of perfect discipleship. Remind us again and again, that what you want of us is that we recognize our need of YOU. Our need of faith. Our need to hear that YOUR grace is more sufficient than our strength. That greater than our righteousness is YOUR power to forgive.

Amen