

Sermon- Revealing Denials

Scripture: John 18:15-26

Sunday, October 18, 2020

Last week Arlis preached on being Christ followers in a very politically charged time. It was a very helpful sermon that directed our attention to keeping our mission as Christ ambassadors over any allegiance to the platform or either party. There is not enough of a meaningful discussion in churches about how our faith should influence our politics so that was very timely and much needed.

We are now in the passion narrative in John. It started with Jesus' arrest after his prayer time at the garden of Gethsemane. What we focused on in that very tense moment was the issue of power. Because you saw a lot of earthly power on display with a whole contingent of 600 armed Roman soldiers. On the other side were Jesus and his 11 followers with maybe one sword. Yet Jesus was fully in charge of the proceedings. Why? Because he had heavenly power. I made the observation that the kind of power you connect to makes a difference. If you use earthly power, it will end up making you filthy inside and out. If you use heavenly power on the other hand, you will be able to be successful agents of God no matter how much earthly power comes against you.

This Sunday we are going to continue with Jesus on his journey. This is where Jesus gets taken on a series of trials. The very first trial is at the home of Annas the high priest. Because there is a second high priest mentioned by the time you get to verse 24 so let me start with a little history lesson. You see the high priest was like the Pope. He is the chief priest, there is only one and his appointment was for a lifetime. But because the Romans were ruling over all of Judea and Israel at the time, the Roman authorities in charge of the region appointed the chief priests. In 6 AD when Quirinius was Governor of Syria and Israel and Judea at the time of Jesus birth, he appointed Annas as the high

priest. But a few years later, the person before the famous Pontius Pilot, was a man named Valerius Gratus. And Valerius Gratus could not tolerate Annas. So he had him removed and appointed his son-in-law Caiphas to that position. However, because Annas was the elder chief priest and removed before his time the Jews still went to him first and was considered the power behind the office. And so people always went to consult with him. It is possible that they even lived in two sections of the same big building with a large courtyard. That is where Jesus was taken. And he was taken to first see Annas before he was taken to Caiphas, the official high priest.

But there is another strange thing in this story that needs to be addressed even if it cannot be fully explained. We know that Jesus was taken into the high priest's house because the guard on duty at the door was a servant girl. This would not be the case at the temple. Now along with Jesus is Peter and the "other disciple". Of course there is a lot of discussion in the literature about who this other disciple is. We are told that this other disciple knew the high priest and so *he* was allowed to go inside with Jesus. Peter on the other hand was blocked from entry. But this other disciple came back, spoke to the servant girl and was able to convince her to let Peter come in. Of course the question is, who was this disciple who had this kind of clout in the house of the high priest right? Speculation is that this was John, the author of the Gospel itself. But this is important because the servant girl asks Peter, "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" Because she is saying, "too" that means she already knows that the other guy she let through was a disciple of Jesus. At it is possible that they would want his disciples to be there to see Jesus on trial because the whole idea was to make an example out of Jesus and discourage his followers from following him. So if this event was a "disciples of Jesus are welcome to watch" event, it would not have been a problem for Peter to gain access as Jesus' disciple. And yet, when he was asked a simple question, "you are not also his disciple are you?" the same Peter who was bold enough to pull out a sword when Jesus was with him, becomes so timid when Jesus was not

that he tells the servant girl, “I am not” a disciple. Even the phrasing of Peter’s denial is important in John. Because it is in direct contrast to Jesus’ declaration “I am he” when the soldiers came to get him. “I AM” as you know is God’s name as revealed to Moses. Peter on the other hand declares, “I am not”.

Immediately in the next verse we have another interesting detail. We are told that it was getting cold. Jerusalem is on a hill and when night falls it gets windy and rapidly becomes cold up there. But the author inserts an obscure detail, there was a charcoal fire in the courtyard. Only the ESV translation bothers to render the Greek (anthrakian) as “charcoal fire”. It was a fire that some soldiers and officials were standing around to warm themselves. Peter too joins them in this. This little detail will become much more significant when we get to the last chapter of John and there is a tie in to another story connecting Peter, Jesus and a “charcoal fire”. For now just file this little fact away till we get to the end of John. Today’s focus is on the statements Peter makes at the night of Jesus’ arrest. And with those historical details squared away we are ready to focus on Peter’s words.

So there is Peter standing around the fire when some others in the group asks Peter, the same question the servant girl asked, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” And again Peter tells them that he is not. Then a third time the question comes up. This time one of the high priests’ servants challenges Peter. He happens to be a relative of Malchus, the guy whose ear Peter cut off. And he was also there when it happened! So this man challenges Peter saying, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” And again Peter denies it. At that very moment the cock crows, just as Jesus had predicted.

Today we are going to look deeper into Peter’s denials. When we read the Bible, we are either learning something about God or something about human nature or both. In examining how Peter reacted under pressure, we get to understand what human nature does under pressure. If we understand this well, we can look for these patterns when

they arise in us so that we can be on the alert and act differently when we are tested like Peter.

In Peter's case back in John chapter 13:37 Peter is so moved about following Jesus that he said, **37... "why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You"**. This is Peter expressing his sincere intentions. And he is also not saying that "I am willing to follow you" thinking that he is going to be put on some "prosperity gospel bed of roses". When Peter is making his commitment to Jesus in chap 13, he is actually declaring that he is willing to do anything for Jesus including dying for him. So did Peter really mean it in chap 13? I think he did. Yet it is one thing to make a declaration when there is no pressure and quite another when the situation gets tense and the stakes are very high as it was on the night Jesus was arrested.

I think there are three points about a Christian walk under pressure that we can learn from this event. The first point I want to make is this. When the stress is thick, our focus like Peter tends to be on meeting the needs of the flesh. In Peter's case he was standing by the fire and warming himself. Now you might be thinking, this is harsh on Peter. After all he was just warming himself in the cold! What's wrong with that? Sure, who would not want to stand by the fire and get warmed up on a cold night? But in this case the context throws this action in a different light. You see if Peter was warming himself by the fire, even though he was in the high priest's compound, he was not with Jesus. And if he was not with Jesus he could not observe Jesus' actions or support Him in his need. He was off in his own corner getting comfortable. And that is not the commitment to follow Jesus he made in chapter 13. This is very similar to the situation in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus specifically took his disciples to pray with him and for him. But even though they were around Jesus technically, they were fast asleep most of that time.

You see taking care of your physical needs is not a bad thing. But when you study the interactions between Jesus and his disciples you realize that there are times when Jesus specifically calls upon His disciples to prioritize him even over their physical needs. This is in effect what fasting is. A call to “fast” is God calling us to focus for a time on Himself over everything else during a stressful situation.

But there are other ways to resolve a stressful situation. You see a stressful situation generates an extreme discomfort in us. And this discomfort can also be removed, by heeding the call of our flesh. This is our flesh’s call to forget everything else and focus only on our bodily needs. This could be stress eating, or drinking or stress shopping or engaging in any number of addictive behaviors. Meeting the needs of our body is not wrong. But when our flesh is calling us to prioritize its needs in a stressful situation as an alternative to what God is calling us to do, it is setting up for us an important choice. And when we are faced with such a choice, our old human nature makes sure we always chose our flesh over God. This is one aspect of our fallen nature that Peter is revealing to us as he stands by the fire warming himself when Jesus is being interrogated in the sham trial. When we are stressed we can either focus on God over our flesh or focus on our flesh over God and our old nature, like Peter warming himself by the fire when Jesus is being grilled, wants us to choose our flesh over God.

There is a second fleshly failing that Peter reveals at this point. You see Peter was asked very plainly, “Are you not one of his disciples?” twice, and a third time, “did I not see you with him?” and all three times Peter denied it. So Peter here is under stress. In that moment of stress, he is being asked an “are you not” question, which is really an identity question. And in Peter’s denial, he is denying his very identity in Christ. This is the most important aspect of who Peter is, right? You and I are one day going to get to meet the apostle Peter. And is Peter’s identity going to be in heaven? It is going to be at Christ’s chief apostle. No other aspect of Peter’s identity will be relevant in heaven

right? But at this point, he is sadly denying his very identity. But what Peter reveals to us about our old human nature is this. When we are under stress, we are tempted to defy our identity in Christ. In our case it is not that someone is asking you, are you a disciple and you say no. In our case, we are under stress and we completely forget what a disciple should be doing and we throw out that identity and act in any old way that our old nature tempts us to act in. Has this ever happened to you? Well, it has happened to me. People think of me as a very calm person and I am very calm most of the time. But sometimes when I am triggered, I act out of character. I raise my voice or mindlessly put food in my mouth, or take my mind off stressful things by news surfing. In a stressful situation it is easy to act out of character. Then I have to remind myself that there is another choice to be made in this situation. The situation is actually an invitation from God to focus closely on Him. When I remember this I am able to snap out of my old nature and snap into my new nature in Christ. In other words, snap into Who I really am. A disciple of Christ. You see the second lesson that Peter's denial is teaching us is this. When we are stressed out we are tempted to act in ways that deny our true identity as Jesus disciples and we tend to act as our old fallen selves.

I want to point out a third thing that happened to Peter that day. Remember this was Jesus' sham trial. It was a sham because it was held in secret at night and it did not follow the proper procedures for a Jewish trial. Which was the presence of 2 or 3 credible witnesses who can testify to the guilt or the innocence of the accused. In this case, none of the witnesses the temple authorities could produce had any credibility or could even give straight statements without contradictions. So it fell on the chief priest to do all the talking. At that point it became more of an interrogation than a trial. But there was something else that was not right with this picture. You see, Jesus had at least two of his disciples there. They could have testified to Jesus' innocence. But the record indicates that none of them said anything. Now if you deny that you had anything to do with Jesus, you then cannot be a witness for him as well right? So that is the third issue

we face when we are in a stressful situation. We not only become flesh focused and act out of character, but along with that we lose our power to be witnesses of Christ at that point. A witness in court needs to have credibility and get their story straight. And what is true in the court of law is true on the larger stage of life itself. If under stress we have become flesh focused and denied our identity in Christ, then we have thrown out are ability to be a witness for Christ as well.

When Peter denied Jesus three times he was focused on catering to his flesh, negating his identity in Christ and in the process losing his capacity to be a witness for Christ. Before I end I want to put in a word for Peter. Later on post Pentecost, Peter now empowered by the Holy Spirit is transformed to be an incredible witness for Christ. In his journey of following Jesus, the early church records that he was intensely persecuted to the point of being crucified upside down. In fact the reason he was crucified upside down is because he asked for it saying that he is not worthy of being crucified in the same manner as His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He did not follow that path by catering to his flesh or straying from his identity in Christ.

We too can follow in the footsteps of the great witnesses who have gone before us because we have their example and the same Holy Spirit who empowered them to make Jesus Christ the real Lord of their lives by staying strong in their identity in Christ. May we to grow fully into our identity in Christ, by overriding our flesh when called for, staying strong in our identity under pressure and glowing in our witness to our precious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us pray.