

FAILING FORWARD--Simon Peter's Story

Confusion and Failure

John 18:1-27

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/failing-forward-confusion-and-failure/

I once heard a mountain climber and guide ask a question. What is the most dangerous part of a mountain climbing experience? The descent. Seventy percent of climbing accidents occur on the way down. Climbers are relaxed. They let down their guard, are tired and overconfident. In Matt. 26:33, Simon Peter brags to Jesus, “Others may desert you, but I never will!” Peter must have been feeling pretty good about himself—all those right answers he gave, all those times he was chosen by Jesus to be a part of the inner circle for some special activity. You see, when things are going well, we have this illusion that we’re the reason. We’ve done it all ourselves and that we are in charge and don’t need others.

In John 13:38, we hear Jesus warning Peter, “Before the rooster crows, you will have denied me three times.” And the triple denial of Jesus by Simon Peter is recorded in all four gospels, telling us how central it is to our lives. The story is told very artfully, alternating back and forth, between Jesus’ trial before the high priest and Peter outside, contrasting Jesus’ courage with Peter’s cowardice. While Jesus has a trial going on inside the house, Simon Peter has a trial going on outside, in the courtyard.

In 1931, the Augustinians built a church on the old ruins of the house of the high priest. The church is called St. Peter in Gallicantu (Latin for “rooster crow”). There is even a golder rooster atop the roof of the church. And at this tragic site, Peter’s three denials seem to spiral in intensity. It was dark and cold, people were uncertain about Simon Peter’s identity. A charcoal fire doesn’t give off much light. They kept asking Simon Peter and he kept denying. And then, look what happens. The third accusation (v. 26) is by a slave standing near, a relative of the man whose ear had been cut off by Peter. Can you say “awkward?” So the one who bragged the loudest about being faithful can’t even make through one night without breaking his commitment to Jesus.

If there is one thing we learn about Simon Peter, it’s that we are never just one thing. We are a jumble of good and bad. Peter thought the enemy was out there: the Romans or high priest or the guard with the bloody ear. No, the enemy was within Simon Peter. Isn’t it true? We lash out at others when the real civil war is in here.

Sure, Simon Peter eventually comes back to the Lord. But think about the damage to our witness when people only encounter us when we’re away from the Lord, at our worst, but don’t see us when we return. And what about the other, more subtle ways we have of denying Jesus?

In her moving book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom told the story of her Dutch Christian family hiding Jews from Hitler's rage. Eventually, the Nazis discover the Ten Boom's work and come to arrest them. In a moving scene, Casper Ten Boom, the elderly patriarch, is being loaded into a truck. The Gestapo chief has a moment of compassion . He offers to let Casper stay at home and avoid prison camp if he gives his word that he won't cause any more trouble. Evenly and clearly, the old man replies, "If I go home today, tomorrow I will open my door again to any man in need who knocks" [p. 128].

This story reminds us we not only deny Christ by turning our back on him but by turning our back on his. Didn't Jesus say when we do good to the last, least and lost, we are going good to him? (Matt. 25:31ff).

Do you know the most amazing part of Simon Peter's story? He told all of this on himself. Think about it. They didn't have smart phones to record all this. He was transparent about his failures. The church today needs to be more like an AA meeting and less like a four-year-old's "let's pretend" game. We are never just one thing. We will fail. But let's fail forward.