

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

9/15/24

Pastor Adam Parker

Sermon Title: Predictable

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:69-75

Matt. 26:69 ¶ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”

Matt. 26:70 But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.”

Matt. 26:71 And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

Matt. 26:72 And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.”

Matt. 26:73 After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.”

Matt. 26:74 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed.

Matt. 26:75 And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Main Point: Like, Peter, all Christians bear the indelible marks of their Savior, even as they disappoint and fall short of their calling.

Outline:

1. True Believers Follow
2. True Believers Fail

3. True Believers are Fortified

Introduction

There is a historian named John Dower who wrote an incredible history of Japan rebuilding after World War II. The name of the book was called *Embracing Defeat*. In the book, Dower recounts the story of Japan at the end of the war. After the atomic bombs were dropped and Japan was soundly defeated, America, by way of General Douglas MacArthur, came to not only rebuild Japan, but to introduce a new form of government entirely. Japan was completely remade in the image of the one who first destroyed it.

Now, I am not entering into a debate here about the use of nuclear weapons, of course. But I am fascinated by the idea that in order for Japan to be remade, it had to first be subdued. Before it could become the great nation and ally that it is today, it first had to, in a sense, be humbled and brought low.

And actually, this has to happen – not just for nations, but for people. Especially if we are to ever live before the face of God. Paul describes this process as a putting off – a dying – of who we were before. “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life...and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22). Right? God has to destroy what was there in order for the new man to come forth. “Put off your old self.”

Like a conquered nation, we have to be humbled and brought low. This happens to Peter today in our passage today. Here Peter is, he’s a sureheaded man, a violent man, even. And he is proud and confident, and until this moment he has really thought of himself as a devoted disciple. Today’s passage is the moment where he really learns firsthand that this isn’t really true of him.

This is a devastating moment. It seems to me that this is the moment when really, Peter as we knew him was defeated. And the man who emerges from this moment is not the same as the one that came before. So today’s passage is, in a sense, the devastation and remaking of Peter. But it’s also a picture of what, on some level, everyone who follows Christ needs to experience.

The three things the passage teach us are that true believers follow, true believers fail, and true believers are fortified.

On some level, all of us should find something familiar and identifiable in Peter's experience here gathered like a coward around this firelight.

1. True Believers Follow (26:69-73)

First, we see in this passage that true believers follow.

Peter literally follows Jesus. In verse 69 it tells us that "Peter was sitting outside the courtyard." It's such a simple statement, but the last we saw he had fled when the gang with clubs came to take Jesus. It turns out, he did run but he still follows from a distance. He still watches.

I think that Peter's actions indicate he is still a follower of Jesus both literally and metaphorically. If you remember Jesus says that he prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail in this moment, and I believe in spite of his struggles we're about to witness, he is still a follower of Jesus.

But this is what it means to be a disciple: to be someone who follows Jesus and learns from him. Who goes where he goes, and follows where he leads. Now, obviously, Peter is a coward, and is afraid (which we'll talk about in the next point), but he is still a follower of Christ. He needs to learn the boldness that can first really only come to someone who has been broken and remade, and God is in the process of doing this right now. Even in this passage he is being disciplined through failure and hardship.

Being Jesus' disciple though, means following him. Jesus said in John 8:12, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Each disciple of Jesus experiences a call to follow him. That message is proclaimed to us in many ways. If you've been baptized at any age, you've already been marked by that call. That call has been placed upon you. And of course that sign points you to the gospel which says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

But you not only heard and continue to hear the call to follow Jesus in your baptism, but whenever the word of God is faithfully preached, that call goes out to

us again. Jesus says to all of us daily, “Repent and follow me.” Peter does this, even if he does it secretly and in fear. But still he cannot help but follow. It’s in his blood, and in his heart to still be near Jesus even if he doesn’t yet have the strength of his convictions.

We can also see that not only does Peter follow Jesus still, but Peter also bears the indelible marks of someone who has actually been with Jesus. He is someone with an interest in Christ, which has marked and changed him. In his case, what gives him away is his accent. There is something unintentional in the way that Peter speaks that tells these people around the fire that Peter is one of Jesus’ followers.

Now, Peter’s tell is his literal accent – a Galilean accent. He sounds like “one of them country folks.”

In each of our lives, as followers of Jesus, if we have spent time in the regions of our Lord, his own accent will show through. People will see his face in our face, and hear his voice in our voice.

To mix metaphors a bit, Paul says in 2 Corinthians that “we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

Why? Because we have the accent of our Lord. The aroma of our Lord. His smell, his mark is upon us.

This means that other believers will see in us the Savior that they love, and for the enemies of Christ, they will see the face, and hear the voice, and smell the scent of the one that they reject. This is why Jesus tells us to expect to be mistreated as he was mistreated, and to expect other believers to embrace us with love.

But Peter shows us here the true believers follow Jesus.

2. True Believers Fail (26:74-75)

Second, Peter shows us something else today, which is that true believers also fail.

Peter is a follower of Jesus here, but he’s a disappointment, right? This is not the hero we were promised in Peter’s oaths and swears and vows he made earlier.

He's a huge disappointment. Let me show you a few things that Peter can show us about our own sin as Christians.

Peter shows that we often fail by sinning. All sins are failures, but not all failures are sins. Sometimes we fail to reach a goal, or we fail to do something we planned to do. That kind of failure isn't a sin necessarily. But all sins are failures to be conformed to the image and law of God.

Peter here clearly sins. Let's get more specific. What Peter does here is, he lies. That is perhaps the most obvious sin. But there are so many layers to this sin. He lies about Jesus. He lies about himself. He lies about what Christ has done for him, and done in him. So he violates the 9th commandment.

But he also violates the 3rd commandment by taking the name of the Lord in vain. He uses God's name to fortify his lie.

I would argue he has violated the 10th commandment by coveting his own life, and by fearing the loss of it. His life belongs to the Lord now, but he wants to keep it.

And he's violated the 1st commandment not to have any other gods, because he has set himself up, and perhaps you might even say he's set up this *servant girl* as a higher figure to be feared even than God.

Sometimes we sin, and we think we only committed a sin. In reality, our sin is a tangle of motivations and violations that draw us away from God.

Peter also shows that disciples often fail in ways that aggravate the sin. In Peter's case here, he doesn't just deny that he knows Jesus, but he denies Jesus *with an oath*. Sometimes we might even use religious language or cover for our own sins. In this case Peter uses God's name to further his lie.

But we can aggravate our own sins in other ways. Our own church's larger catechism, as an example, says that we can increase or aggravate the sinfulness of our own sins, for example, by committing them on the Lord's Day. We aggravate our sins if we are of older age and greater experience, or if we are more gifted than others, yet we sin anyway. Our sins are more aggravated if they are against

weaker brethren. Our sins are more aggravated if there is no way to make reparation for the wrong that we do. We aggravate our sins more if we do them willfully and with delight or with boasting. We also aggravate our sins if we are relapsing after repentance. Honestly, I really recommend reading Larger Catechism 151 some time. It's a very powerful catechism question that I think many of us may not be as familiar with. Peter has aggravated his sin here in many ways, as disciples occasionally do.

Peter also shows that disciples often fail in ways we never would have anticipated.

Do you ever see those expectations vs. reality compilations on YouTube?

Expectation: They'll show a video of some guy graciously flying through the air on a snowboard. Expectation.

Then they'll cut to a video of a different guy trying to do the same stunt, and he just kind of lands on his face: reality.

That's Peter. His expectation was very high. He thought he was going to fly. Peter envisioned a *very* different encounter here. If you listen to how he talked to Jesus before, it seems like Peter has spent time anticipating and planning how this would go if it ever came to it. He had predicted this moment over and over again, and always assumed he would come out of it a victorious individual, an admirable man. But when it actually came, he discovered he was a very different man than he imagined. So it often is with us as disciples.

Peter shows us here that disciples often fail in ways that are humiliating. John Chrysostom, in his own sermon on this passage, says that Peter was "dead with fear." But he also points out that Peter was ready to fight armed men for Jesus! But when a "tiny and lowly servant girl" casually asked him if he knew Jesus, he crumbled. Our failures are often humiliating, aren't they?

Peter also shows us that disciples often fail in ways that are not necessarily public.

Peter's failure takes place in public, but the failure itself is not public. Nobody knows what is really happening here except Peter and Jesus. Even the servant girl here doesn't know the real story. People aren't sitting around here thinking, "Wait. Didn't Jesus predict this?" No, the anguish is Peter's anguish. No one else seems to know except Peter and Jesus. Sometimes, we may fail in ways that the world sees, and that others are witness to. We may sin against our friends or our family in ways that need to be confronted. But much of our own battle will take place in our own heart, and in private. We are each responsible to pursue the Lord and his holiness. Peter has sinned here, even if no one else realizes what has happened.

Our own sin is grievous to us. The issue is not that we sin, the issue we must all answer is, what will we *do* with our sin? Will we bring it to Jesus, or will we try to cover ourselves, fix ourselves, and change ourselves from our own willpower? Peter has lived that way up to this point, but perhaps now he sees that he can't depend on himself to be a dependable helper, savior, or guide.

In either case, Peter shows us that true believers fail. We sin.

3. True Believers are Fortified (John 21:1-19)

Third, we learn from Peter that true believers are fortified.

I thought a lot about this, and how I would do this, but ultimately I decided that I'm going to step outside of Matthew's gospel to make this third point. And the reason for this is, John's gospel gives the fullest account of Peter's restoration. And we see this in John 21:1-19. I won't read all of the passage, because it really deserves its own sermon. But I do want to remind you what happens. Let me set the stage for a moment:

After the crucifixion, after the resurrection, the disciples are out fishing, and when they return to shore, they see Jesus. After Jesus has breakfast with them, Peter is alone with Jesus, and then this moment happens: in the first words that Jesus and Peter exchange after Peter has denied Jesus three times, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Jesus. And three times Peter

replies that he does. And each time, Jesus tells Peter, “feed my sheep.” Jesus then tells Peter how he will bring glory to Jesus’ name in how he dies.

Here is what is so extraordinary to me: In verse 75, you see a man who is probably at the lowest and darkest place possible. He never, ever imagined this about himself: that he would deny Jesus. He swore over and over again that he’d sooner die. He never believed this about himself. Because of that, in this failure he’s seen new depths to the sin of his own heart. And here he was, denying he knew Jesus – not to some soldier, or some high official. He denied Jesus to some no-name servant girl!

And yet Jesus doesn’t show up to Peter and say, “I can’t have a follower who is afraid of a little girl.” That’s not the message he has for his disciples.

Instead he says, “Okay, now that you’ve failed you’re really ready to follow me, but this time not in your strength.” Jesus uses the denial of Peter to *shape* Peter, to *humble* Peter, to make a servant of Peter. In fact, before this took place, Jesus said in Luke 22:32 that he had something in mind. He actually prayed for Peter.

He said, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” You see the plan of Jesus: that though Peter *would* collapse, he would remain a believer – a disappointing, frail and failed believer, but still a believer. And now that he has been devastated by his own sin, Jesus says, “Now you are ready to strengthen your brothers.”

I am far from a horse expert. But I am at least familiar with the *concept* of breaking a horse. A horse needs to become rideable so that they will be able to serve their master by being ridden. Only by being broken can a horse be useful to its master.

God does not readily use an unbroken servant. We need to be broken in our pride, broken in our strongheadedness, broken in our stubbornness in insisting on our own ways. Sometimes this happens through our own failures, even moral failures. Sometimes God breaks us by just showing us how helpless we are and reducing us to the point that all we can do is pray. Sometimes God breaks us simply by taking away our sense of power.

Making us helpless. Health-wise, finance-wise, relationship-wise. He makes us see that we can't control our world. For some of us it takes a lot to make us really cry "uncle." We already thought we knew these things in our soul until he shows us that we really didn't.

And some are more stubborn than others and require more discipline to break. But all disciples who will be used by God will have those humbling experiences eventually.

Whatever that ends up looking like, God does use our failures, he uses our suffering and our tears just like he does in Peter's life. Only once Peter has been broken can he live a life that is Jesus-shaped instead of Peter-shaped.

Perhaps you've been broken. Perhaps you are in the *midst* of being broken. Perhaps you feel like you are beyond being broken. "I've been broken and then some."

Or perhaps your life has gone pretty smoothly so far. You should still expect suffering and humbling that will press on the aspects of your life that you thought were strong. And you should expect God to use those experiences to shape you uniquely in different ways.

We all fail our master. But however you have failed or suffered, please remember that God is at work in you to will and to do his good pleasure. And once you are broken, He is gracious to pick you up from your failures, and he will use you. One way that Paul mentions him using this breaking is in 2 Cor. 1:3-4. He says that we are "to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." How does the tool of comforting others get handed to us? First we must suffer, then be comforted, and then share that same comfort. Suffering is the way that this tool of comforting others gets handed to us. Only a comforted person can comfort someone .

In another place Paul speaks of this humbling and breaking in an ongoing way. In 2 Cor. 12:7 Paul says that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from becoming conceited. Paul's ministry was always in danger of producing pride, so God kept his pride down through this suffering in his life.

I remember a friend at seminary preaching at a church on the circuit. And I asked an elder at that church how my friend did preaching for them the week before, and the elder replied, "He preaches well enough. But I don't believe he's ever suffered." Now, that may have been judgmental of the elder, but in this case I thought it showed that this wise elder believed that only in suffering are we able to minister to those who suffer.

Peter is restored here; he's fortified. And now he can serve.

Conclusion

Think of what has happened to Peter here: he's learned his own sinfulness. He's seen how deceptive his own heart is. He's seen how insufficient he really is. Gone is the fighter, Peter. The Peter who emerges is a new man, a man who lives by grace, a man who is defined by Christ and his love now.

This is what grace does, though. It tears out our self-sufficiency. So much so that later when Peter is writing his epistle he can remember this moment when he saw Jesus suffering: "For Christ also suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pe 3:18). No longer does Peter envision himself charging into God's presence. Now he knows... it's only through the suffering servant that he can come.

Peter only sees the need for the righteousness of Christ because he came to the end of himself. Have you had that experience? Perhaps you've always trusted in Christ even from a young age. You still need to remember that you are who you are only because of Christ. Or perhaps you've never trusted in Christ, really. You've lived by self-confidence and self-empowerment and self-focus. If that's you, you don't have to have a disaster like Peter has here to turn to him in humility.

We spoke about America's conquest of Japan after World War II. Yes, they were destroyed, but they were also remade. Many Japanese commentators pictured the coming democracy like a hand coming down from above, and cutting the chains of imperial tyranny that they lived under. Many Japanese saw democracy as a gift that had not been earned. In fact, there was a social commentator named Kato

Etsuro, who made this comment in a public Japanese drawing of a giant pair of scissors held by uncle Sam cutting the chains of the Japanese, with this caption: “Chains were cut – but we must not forget that we did not shed a drop of blood, or raise a sweat, to cut these chains.”

Are you able to say that for yourself? Chains were cut, but *I* did not shed a drop of blood, or raise a sweat, to cut these chains. Instead, I was liberated by Jesus, whose sweat was as great drops of blood. I’ve been set free by the Lord, who did shed his own blood for me.

Christ tells us in his word, this is the hope of glory: not you, and not me, and not what we’ve done. But Christ alone.

Let’s pray.