

“Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 3”

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Sermon: “Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 3”

Over the last two weeks we’ve explored the utility of the phrase “Bless your heart” and how it is so often used in relation to the disciple Peter. I won’t go into it all over again, but if you weren’t here, the gist was simply this:

“Bless your heart” is a versatile piece of the southern English dialect that can express many things depending on how and when you say it. While it can express sympathy, approval, or compassion, it is often used in a way that translates loosely as “*You’re not very bright, are you?*”

It’s this last use that seems to apply to Peter so often in the gospels. Peter had a heart in need of blessing. He was one of Jesus’ disciples and a close friend, and while he often got things right, he also sometimes got them wrong. Very wrong.

Today we hear another chapter in the story of Peter, who had good intentions. But, bless his heart, he couldn’t always follow through on them.

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

[The scene is the last supper., Jesus has just dropped a bomb on the disciples by saying that one of them will betray him.]

³¹“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” ³³And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” ³⁴Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

[The story continues with Jesus retreating to the Garden at Gethsemane to pray. Later, servants of the High Priest arrive to arrest Jesus]

⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.

Of all Peter’s gaffes, this one might have been the most painful. At the last supper, when Jesus told the disciples that one of their number would betray him, Peter made a pledge of loyalty, promising to follow Jesus even to prison or worse, death. It’s understandable. Put yourself in Peter’s shoes. Jesus just said, “One of you will betray me.” Then he looks over at Peter and says “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail ...”

Wait, what? Maybe Peter felt a little anxious about what all of that might mean. Luke tells us the disciples were aghast, arguing around the table about who might betray Jesus and why it wasn’t one of them. In the heat of the moment, Peter could have felt defensive; like he needed to counter the implication that *he* might betray Jesus. So, he made a big ole’ promise: “Not me, Lord. You can depend on me! I’ll be with you to the bitter end.”

But like many a promise before and since, when reality sets-in, other priorities emerge, and that promise goes right out the window. When people begin to recognize him and question him about his relationship with Jesus, fear set-in and the threat became real. Peter seemed to forget his promise altogether. “Jesus you say? Never heard of him.” And that’s what people remember most about Peter in this story - bless his heart.

Now some folks have called Peter a fair-weather disciple; he follows while the following is good, but as soon as things turn ugly, his loyalty dries up completely. But was he a fair-weather disciple? Well, you can certainly make that case, and folks often do.^{1 2}

He shows all the signs of dedication when things are going well. He gives-up his job to follow Jesus. He does what Jesus says and goes where Jesus sends him. He is the first to say that Jesus is the Messiah. He wants to go walk on water with Jesus. He is with Jesus on the mountaintop when Jesus is transfigured and receives a visit from Elijah and Moses.³ He is there when Jesus enters Jerusalem to the cheers of adoring crowds on Palm Sunday. He is there as Jesus preaches and teaches in the temple during Holy Week.

Even when things get tense, Peter is still there. He is there at the Last Supper and in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prays “Lord if it be your will, let this cup pass from my hands.” And he is there to defend Jesus when the servants of the high priest come to arrest him. He even draws his sword and strikes one of the men who have come to take Jesus away.

As long as the dream of the Messiah King Jesus lives, Peter is as faithful a disciple as they come. But then, Jesus is arrested, and it becomes clear that this Messiah will not wage war to keep himself free. The disciples scatter. Jesus, once surrounded by followers yearning to learn from him and crowds crying out to be saved by him, must now face what comes next ... alone.

So, does that make Peter a fair-weather disciple? No. And I’ll tell you why: Because he was there.

You see, when people read this story, they almost always focus on Peter’s denial. People don’t realize how important it is that Peter was there, and in a position to deny Jesus in the first place. When Jesus is arrested in the garden and carried away, Luke tells us that Peter followed at a distance. And after “They” have taken Jesus away, “They” kindle a fire in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, and Peter sat among them. So, who are “They”? “They” are the same people who arrested Jesus and brought him back to the High Priests house in the first place. And Peter just walks-up and sits among them around the open fire. That’s pretty bold.

Peter hasn’t abandoned Jesus. He is there - close at hand. And Peter knew the danger he accepted by being there. We know this because when people start to recognize him, he lies. And he lies not because he doesn’t love Jesus or want to be associated with him anymore. He lies out of pure self-preservation. He was afraid for his life. If I’m being completely honest, I’m not sure I can blame Peter for keeping his mouth shut.

But no matter what, he was there.

So, we see that impetuous, rash Peter is the only one of Jesus’ disciples to stick around when the trials of Jesus begin. That’s worth something. But it’s not worth *everything*.

Peter made a promise. He sat there next to Jesus, looked him in the eye and promised. We simply cannot escape the fact that when Jesus is facing his accusers and his uncertain future alone, Peter is just a few yards away, out in the courtyard, breaking that promise. Bless his heart.

But that’s not the worst of it. Peter doesn’t just break a vow to Jesus. He doesn’t just deny being his disciple. He denies his very identity and vocation. Remember, right after Peter confessed his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus says to him, “You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church.”⁴ Peter is foundational to what Jesus is doing in the world. Peter isn’t just *some guy*. He is the cornerstone of the church! When he says he doesn’t even know Jesus, he isn’t just betraying a friendship, he is denying who he is fundamentally.

It would be like the British capturing George Washington during the American Revolution and Thomas Jefferson claiming to have no connection with him.

It would be like Robin denying he fought crime with Batman.

It would be like Mission Control saying “Neil Armstrong? Who’s that guy? Never heard of him.”

Jesus is counting on Peter’s faith and strength and his impetuosity and passion to build the church. Peter is not just a friend of Jesus. He is important to everything Jesus is doing. So, when Peter says “Nope, never heard of the guy”, he not only denies his relationship with Jesus, he denies his own role in bringing in the Kingdom of God - and it is shockingly easy

to do. It takes little or no effort, just a shake of the head and a few words. And before he knows it, the sun is peeking over the horizon and the rooster is crowing to greet the new day. And Peter is convicted by his own failure. Bless his heart.

But we can learn from Peter, because I think we sometimes deny Jesus, too.

Back when I was working in Youth Ministry, we used to play a game called “Christians and Romans.” The kids were the Christians trying to make it from one end of the church to the other. The adult leaders were the Romans trying to catch them.

When you got caught you had to answer one question: “Are you a Christian?” If you said “yes”, you went to jail; “No”, and you could keep going. It was always interesting how many kids would answer “No.”

Sure, it was just a game. Saying “No” shouldn’t be a big deal, I guess. But then again, it is just a game, so why would saying “yes” be so difficult? Simply put, to a lot of those kids the goal of “winning” the game was more important. It struck me then as it does now, that we often make the same choice in our daily lives. The goals toward which we strive, the things we consider valuable, are often reason enough to deny Jesus.

And it’s shockingly easy to do. We know what it means to be a disciple: following the teachings of Jesus is paramount; to love God and one another first and foremost. And it can be easy to commit to that kind of a disciple’s life when we’re here in the safe, comfy church surrounded by reminders of who God is and what God has done.

But then out there, when real life is happening, it can be shockingly easy to deny we ever knew Jesus at all. Oh, maybe not with our words like Peter did, but with our actions.

When we embrace prejudices and petty hatreds, we deny Jesus.

When we see and hear racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, and we say nothing and we do nothing; we deny Jesus.

When we hoard what we have out of fear of scarcity or of being taken advantage of, we deny Jesus.

When we hold grudges and refuse to work toward reconciliation, we deny Jesus.

When we proclaim that Jesus is our Lord, but then elect leaders who are ignorant of what that means, we deny Jesus.

When we come to church to receive the *comfort* of the gospel and then walk back out those doors and live the other six days of the week as though the gospel does not also challenge us, we deny Jesus.

At one time or another, we have probably all denied Jesus, either by our words or by our actions. Bless our hearts.

But there is one other thing about this story that makes it important for us to hear today: “The Look.” When the rooster crows and Peter realizes what has happened, he looks over at Jesus and Jesus gives him “The Look.” And I think people always assume it was some kind of stink eye - a judgmental glare. The look your mom and dad give you when they’ve caught you doing something you weren’t supposed to be doing and now and you’re in big trouble.

But I don’t think so.

You see, Jesus called it. He knew what would happen. Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. Peter the impetuous, the bold, the brash, promised to follow Jesus even to prison and death. And I imagine that Jesus loved him for that. For the way he valued courage. For the way he knew what was right. Jesus probably even knew that Peter meant every word he said. But he also knew Peter wasn’t strong enough to follow through. And sure enough, when Peter, the rock, is put in the position to fulfill those intentions, he crumbles.

But “The Look” wasn’t one of scorn and judgement. Jesus loves Peter and forgives Peter for his weakness. That’s what the look is all about. It was a moment of compassion. It was a look that said “It’s okay, Peter. I know. I understand.” And it’s a sign that the relationship Peter has denied, Jesus continues to embrace; and that the role Peter has rejected, Jesus re-establishes. It is a moment of grace.

And sure enough on Easter morning, Peter is there. In the book of Acts, when the early church is getting started, Peter is there, too. Not because Peter is so good, but because Jesus gives second chances and third and fourth and so on.

When we deny Jesus, either by our words or our actions, we deny who we are fundamentally. Bless our hearts. And yet Jesus' grace and mercy are bigger than our weakness. And when we confess our failures, God is willing to forgive us and cleanse us and make us new.

And that's good news.

We like to think that following Jesus is a smooth trip - it's not. We sometimes hold ourselves to a standard where missteps are not allowed - they are. We lift-up Peter as a hero who got it right every time - he didn't. But in Peter's story, we learn that Jesus is always present, always faithful, always forgiving, always straightening us out and sending us back in the right direction.

And thank God for that.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "LIO 7/10: Risk Factor: Fair Weather Faith – Living It Out." 18 July 2019, livingitout.tv/bible-study/lio-710-risk-factor-fair-weather-faith.

² "A Work in Progress – Lookout Magazine." 18 July 2019, lookoutmag.com/2011/a-work-in-progress.

³ Mark 9:2-8, NRSV

⁴ Matthew 16:18, NRSV