

SERMON: Devotion and Denial
TEXT: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

3-13-22

Do you remember that kid in school who always had her hand up, who always had the right answers, always had something to add to the discussion, and always got such high grades that it ruined the curve for everyone else? You probably even remember that person's name. I remember Diana from elementary school. Not "die-ana" but "dee-ah-nah." She was from Germany. She spoke German and had a German accent. And she knew everything. I might have been the curve-buster myself, had it not been for Diana.

In Junior High it was my friend, Julie. And in High School, still Julie. To be fair, she had some humility and wasn't so obnoxious. Even in seminary there were classmates who always sat in the front row, always dominated the discussion, and always had the ear of the professor after class. One of my classmates had been a lawyer before he came to seminary, and he loved to hear himself talk. Then there was my friend, Deb, who was pretty and outgoing and fun and sweet and talented and and and. We were taking Hebrew together, and it was my first seminary class, as well as the first foreign language I ever studied. I was terrified.

I remember one day that we were taking a test which involved translating Hebrew sentences into English. Deb was sitting next to me, and I noticed about halfway through the class, she had apparently finished the test. But instead of getting up and leaving, she continued to appear busy. She had taken another sheet of paper and was using the long edge of it to draw boxes around her answers on the test. Using colored pencils. While I and every other person in the class was still struggling to translate, Deb was decorating her finished translations. I wanted to tell her to just please leave. In my misery, I did not love her company.

Now, if you had to pick out who this person was among the twelve disciples of Jesus, who would it be? For me, Peter is the most memorable character. He seemed to be the one to have an answer for all of Jesus' questions. And even though he didn't always answer correctly and didn't always understand, at least he was paying attention. I think Peter really wanted to be the teacher's pet.

As a fisherman, Peter was brash and unrefined. He was impulsive, often speaking and acting before thinking. Remember when Jesus called Peter? He and his brothers had been fishing all night with nothing to show for it. But Jesus told him to put down the nets into the deep water, and the catch of fish was so great it

tore the net and nearly swamped the boat. Then Peter fell on his knees at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man."

Peter was the one who wanted to walk on water when he saw Jesus doing it. When Jesus questioned his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter was the one to answer, "You are God's Messiah." Peter was the one on the mountain with Jesus when he was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared; and Peter was the one who wanted to make shelters for each of them. Peter was the one who rebuked Jesus for talking of his imminent death, and Jesus responded, "Get behind me, Satan." Legend has it that Peter was the one who cut off the ear of one of the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus.

In today's passage, Peter is the one who promises his devotion to Jesus, after the Last Supper, when Jesus told the disciples that one of them would betray him. But now Jesus directs his words to Peter alone. "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I don't remember this part. And I find it to be both empowering and discouraging. Especially when Satan is mentioned, it's good to know - it's essential to know - that Jesus is praying for you. On the other hand, it almost feels like a set-up. "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail you." If you're reading between the lines, or listening for what's not being said, I sense that failure is a foregone conclusion. "Good luck out there, Peter. Hope you don't fall on your face!" Furthermore, if even Jesus himself is praying for you specifically, it must be a mighty powerful challenge you're facing.

And once again, I think that Peter is too quick to answer. Has he even heard what Jesus said? Instead of questioning Jesus about what he means, Peter immediately responds with his affirmation of faith: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!"

His certainty is laudable. His lack of hesitation is comforting. And from what I know of Peter, I believe his devotion is genuine. Of course, this kind of devotion - to prison and to death - is easier said than done.

When young couples become engaged, it seems they have undying devotion for one another. When I am the officiant, I require counseling before they get

married. I really want them to think about what life will be like *after* the big event. Often so much of their energy is spent on planning the ceremony, I wonder how much they have considered their vows. The promises they're making, that are meant to last a lifetime. There's nothing wrong with imagining a bright future together. But the years ahead will be filled with moments of better *and worse*, richer *and poorer*, *sickness* and health. My purpose is not to cast a shadow over that bright future or put a damper on their bliss, but a little reality check is necessary. Before they start down the aisle, it's important to be aware of and willing to discuss all the challenges from "I do" "until death do us part."

Soon enough, Peter finds his devotion to Jesus being put to the test. While the other disciples have disappeared, Peter follows the soldiers who are taking Jesus away. At the home of the high priest, they join a gathering in the courtyard. Three different people indicate that they recognize Peter as one of Jesus' followers. Three different times, Peter denies him. And then the rooster crowed. And Peter wept bitterly.

But this is not the end of the story for Peter. Remember that Jesus prayed specifically for him. "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and

you, *when once you have turned back*, strengthen your brothers.” Peter will turn back. His failure is not forever. And his devotion is stronger than his denial.

One biblical scholar wrote, “Jesus intercedes for Peter, and though Peter denies Jesus, ultimately his faith does not fail. Repentance and seeking forgiveness, even for a grievous failure, are themselves signs of faith.... As Jesus predicts Peter’s denials, he affirms that his role has been to pray that Peter’s faith may not fail. Peter’s role will be to turn back and having turned back, to strengthen the others who will face similar trials. As a model for Christian discipleship, this passage assumes that we will not always prove faithful. We will fail despite our best intentions and the Lord’s intercession, but the passage is open ended. The end of the story has yet to be written. What do we do with our failures? Do we let them stand as the final verdict on us, or do we turn back from them and use them to strengthen our resolve in the future and help those who face trials that we now know from the inside out? Peter is the model disciple, not because he never failed, but because he turned back.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol IX, Luke, John, pp. 428-429)

Our failures of faith and devotion do not have to be final. Let us find confidence in Peter’s story, that we can also turn back and find forgiveness. To the glory of God! AMEN.