

Lent 6

THE PRAYER (In Unison) Almighty God, Heavenly Father, we are sinners who deny you by our sin and doubt, who hurt others by our selfishness, and who fail ourselves by not leaning on the love and strength which only comes from you. When in fear we are tempted to sin and deny you, remind us that in courage, and in love, Jesus died for us. Help us by your love and forgiveness to live for you. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit; one God, now and forever. Amen.

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

The First Lesson

Matthew 26:57-75

57 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. 58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. 66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him 68 and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

69 Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. 70 But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. 71 Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" 73 After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." 74 Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. 75 Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

The Second Lesson

John 21:14-19

14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. 15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Feed my lambs.**"

16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Take care of my sheep.**"

17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Feed my sheep.**"

18 I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "**Follow me!**"

Before the Sermon (Gloria is reading a magazine. Joel sees her and calls to her.)

Joel: Hi Gloria! It's good to see you. I've been meaning to ask if you want to join our Bible Class for a prayer retreat next weekend.

Gloria: Joel, I'd really like to go, but I just don't think I can. I guess I'm just not as good a Christian as you are.

Joel: What do you mean, Gloria?

Gloria: Joel, I'm not sure how you do it. Your family is doing well. You're respected in the community. You always have a positive word to say. You serve in leadership in our church. Joel, you make me tired just watching. And now you have time for a prayer retreat? No, I can't go. I believe in Jesus and try to get to church. I'm just not as good a Christian as you are.

Joel: Hmm. I'm sorry, Gloria. I didn't mean to give that impression. If I did I was wrong.

Gloria: I don't know Joel. Anyway, I've already got family activities planned for that weekend. It's my daughter's birthday.

Have you ever felt like Gloria? Christian life is a struggle. Living for God and not for ourselves is difficult. Believing in the God of love and salvation in a world of pain, hatred, violence, and poverty is difficult. You try to live your faith in this difficult world, and then you see that person who seems to live as a Christian so easily that you are discouraged at your own efforts and wonder, "Why even try?"

Many could have seen Peter that way, and probably did. Peter was always out front, always speaking. Sometimes he said just the right thing. Sometimes he put his foot in his mouth, but Peter always had something to say. And after the resurrection, Peter seemed to be a rock, a pillar, whose courage and faith and Christian life seemed to come easily. For some, maybe even for the rest of the disciples, it can be discouraging to try to live for the Lord, and then looking at someone else think you have failed.

However, such appearances are only that, appearances. There is no perfect Christian. There is only the perfect Christ. You don't even have to look at Peter's denial of Jesus which we read tonight in Matthew 26 to know that Peter wasn't perfect. You can watch Peter in Matthew 14, when he followed Jesus on to the water, and then doubted. You can listen to Peter after his great confession of Jesus in Matthew 16, when his feeling get in the way of his faith and Jesus had to tell Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." You can look with surprise perhaps, and astonishment in Galatians 2. Someone with Peter's experience and learning under the Lord should have know better than to act in a way that Paul had to call him down. No, there are no perfect Christians, not even Peter.

But the one failure and sin that Peter could never forget was his denial of Jesus. Jesus had predicted that all would fall away. "Not me," Peter said. Then Jesus told Peter that Jesus had prayed for him, because Peter would deny Jesus 3 times that night. Peter, sure of *himself* assured Jesus that he would die first. All the others joined in the protest. And, for a little while Peter was actually brave, if sleepy. While he fell asleep during Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, he did draw the sword to protect Jesus. But, Jesus had to scold him again. "Put away the sword. All who live by the sword will die by the sword." But, when Jesus was before the Jewish leaders and Peter was watching, others were watching him. A simple maid asked him if he wasn't one of Jesus' followers. If he said yes he might be arrested. He wanted to stay for his Lord. He denied it. Then others recognized him and he sensed danger. He denied knowing Jesus again, and finally a final time, with a curse, denied knowing Jesus. When Jesus looked at him right after this third denial, Peter knew that even being told of his weakness and sin he could not prevent it. He couldn't support his Lord the way he wanted.

As Peter had time to think about all this he experienced his own shame, and weakness, and despair. He knew that Jesus was forgiving and might forgive him. But certainly he could never be a disciple again, or the acknowledged leader of the disciples. Peter had an opportunity to live and even die for Jesus, and he had failed. No, Peter's days of service were gone.

But then that day on the beach of the Sea of Galilee Jesus appeared to them again. Jesus appeared with the same miracle with which he had first called James and John, Peter and Andrew, to be fishers of men. Jesus revealed himself again in a miraculous catch of fish. Then, Jesus called Peter aside privately. And just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus asked Peter three times if Peter loved Him. Peter answered yes. But he had said the right thing before and done the wrong thing. It was Jesus answers that changed the life of this self assured sinner.

Peter answered Jesus the first time, and Jesus' response was, "**Feed my lambs.**" Could Jesus really still want Peter as a disciple, telling others about Jesus? The second time Jesus asked, Peter answered, and Jesus responded, "**Take care of my sheep.**" Was Jesus really calling Peter again? Jesus asked Peter a third time, reminding Peter of his three denials. Peter especially reassured Jesus of his love, and Jesus responded, "**Feed my sheep.**" Just so Peter wouldn't think following Jesus was ever easy, Jesus told Peter that following Jesus would even include a humiliating death. And then Jesus topped it all off with the same call as the first time he called Peter as a disciple, "**Follow me!**"

Some think Peter was a rock. Really, Peter knew only too well how much he was shifting sand. But Peter had a rock, a cornerstone, a firm foundation. Peter had Jesus. And Jesus gave Peter forgiveness and love time and time and time again. Didn't Jesus keep calling him?

Some think they can't be a Christian because their lives have been too weak. Others say they can't serve in church. "I'm divorced." "I've been addicted." "My mouth has not spoken praise, but cursing." "I've been in trouble with the law." Yes, Jesus knows all that. That's why Jesus came, to die and forgive us. Jesus knows all that and he called Peter, and He calls us. Guess what, our service and ministry is not about us. And that changes everything. Our service and ministry is about Jesus.

(After the Sermon) (Scene continues from the first scene.)

Gloria: Joel, I'm not sure how you do it. Your family is doing well. You're respected in the community. You always have a positive word to say. You serve in leadership in our church. You make me tired just watching. And now you have time for a prayer retreat? No, I can't go. I believe in Jesus and try to get to church. I'm just not as good a Christian as you are.

Joel: Hmm. I'm sorry, Gloria. I didn't mean to give that impression. If I did I was wrong.

Gloria: I don't know Joel. Anyway, I've already got family activities planned for that weekend. It's my daughter's birthday.

Joel: Gloria, I think I've given a bad witness. If my faith seems about what I've done, then I've failed.

Gloria: What do you mean, Joel?

Joel: Well, I've always been sort of hyper. That's who I am. But, that gets me in trouble too. This hyper guy was a party guy when I was young. I got in trouble with partying and the law. When my pastor came to see me in jail I was so ashamed. But, he was glad to see me. He hugged me. I confessed to my pastor with tears and he told me we all fail, that's why God sent a Savior, not just a teacher. He said God knew my sin, and Jesus died for my sin. While he died for my sin Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Gloria, it all struck me that I can try to live a happy and good life, but I'll fail. But, there is one thing that doesn't fail. Jesus is always there calling me to His love. Jesus is always there calling me to His forgiveness. And, Jesus is calling me to live a new life in that forgiveness and to serve Him.

Gloria: Joel, I never knew.

Joel: Well, I don't tell everybody. But, when I got out of jail the pastor asked me to help in a recovery ministry. Then he asked me to lead a Bible class. Later he asked me to be an elder. I don't do these things because I'm so good. I do them because I can serve the one who forgives me.

Gloria: Well, Joel, I still have a birthday party next weekend. But, I've been thinking I had to be stronger to serve Jesus. What I really need is to know that Jesus' love and forgiveness are strong enough to call me, even when I'm weak.

Joel: His forgiveness and His call are amazing, aren't they, Gloria?