

Flawed Yet Faithful sermon series
Jesus Who? – Matthew 26:69-75
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How well do you know yourself? Shortly after the attacks of Sept. 11, a man in my congregation made an appointment to see me. He was obviously very agitated and upset by those events, so I expected him to be angry about the suicide bombers or ask deep theological questions about God's presence in the midst of the attacks. Instead, he sat down and through his tears said, "I don't know if I could have done it. If I were one of those firefighters, I don't know if I could have rushed into the buildings to save people. I might have run the other way. I'd like to think I would do the right thing. But when the moment comes, I don't know if I could do it."

Could you? How well do we know ourselves? That's the kind of question we're called to wrestle with during Lent, to take a deep look at ourselves and acknowledge the difference between who we are and who God calls us to be. Coming to this understanding about ourselves and our need for Christ is a journey, one we are called to walk with Jesus as he prepares to go to the cross. For our Lenten sermon series, we've been looking at Peter, who had to ask himself these same questions as he wrestled with what it meant to faithfully follow Jesus. At times, he's ran headlong into the fray, courageously proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah or stepping out of the boat on faith to walk on water. Yet, at other times he's turn tail and ran, completely missing Jesus' point of who he is and what he came to earth to accomplish.

Today is probably the most egregious example of Peter's mercurial faith. What you need to know is, just a few verses before our story today, Peter pledged to Jesus to do the opposite of what he ends up doing. While at the table during the Last Supper, Jesus says, "You will all fall away because of me this night." Peter indignantly replies, "Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus, who by this point in the story is well aware of Peter's wishy-washy faith, tells him that actually, he will commit the most serious of desertions, denying he even knows Jesus. But Peter vehemently argues with Jesus (which should be a sign right there that you're not on the right track). You can almost see Peter stomp his foot and exclaim, "Even if I have to run into a burning building for you, I'll never deny you!"

Not long after Peter makes his bold profession of faith, he has an opportunity to live it out. While Jesus is on trial, Peter makes his way to the courtyard below the Sanhedrin. He's confronted three times about being in cahoots with this rabble-rouser Jesus, given three chances to take a stand for his faith. Notice the progress of his denials. At first, Peter claims ignorance – "I don't know what you're talking about"; then, he denies being a part of Jesus' followers; and finally, he swears and flatly denies any relationship with Jesus – "I don't know this man you're talking about." He declares he doesn't know the one who healed his mother-in-law, the one who invited him onto the mountain of transfiguration, the one who helped him walk on water and then saved him from drowning. While Jesus is being put on trial, his very life on the line, Peter is denying him. When the moment comes for Peter to rush back into the burning building, he runs away.

Have you done this, committed to something in one moment only to backpedal the next? I remember in the early days of the internet, I joined a chatroom on UK basketball. The room was filled with both fans and haters, and I added my never-give-up voice to the UK supporters, a move that I've been questioning lately. When one of the haters said I was a flash in the pan, I counted, "Nope! I'm here to stay, and I'll post every day to defend my beloved Wildcats!" Three days later, I realized I hadn't posted in three days. I feel you, Peter.

Why Peter? Why, of all the disciples, did he have to fall the farthest? Because it had to be Peter. He is the most likely culprit because he is the least likely. It could have been any of the others and may well have been. But it has to have been Peter, because if the one of great faith is capable of a great fall, then so is anyone else, including each and every one of us.

This is a bit of an embarrassing story, isn't it? If I were Peter, I don't know that I would be happy with Matthew for sharing it. But did you know that this story is not just in Matthew, but also in Mark, Luke, and John? Peter accomplishes a quadrifecta, having this humiliating tale told in all four gospels. If I were him, I would have gotten out my red pen and slashed through this story so that my biggest failure of faith wouldn't be preserved for all eternity.

But Peter does just the opposite. The first gospel written was Mark, but Mark was not a disciple, so he didn't witness any of what he wrote about Jesus. Instead, he relied on another eyewitness, someone Mark worked and served with for years, someone who would have first-hand accounts of this story. Mark's source was Peter. That means that Peter made sure that Mark included this story in the gospel. It's as if Peter is saying, "I want you to know how far I fell, so that you can understand the depth to which Jesus went to forgive and redeem me. If he would do that for me, imagine what Jesus will do for you."

Denying Jesus is such a sad thing, but the fact is we all do it. We may not do it verbally, but our lives are filled with little denials. Each time we choose not to help meet someone else's need, each time we choose to tolerate or participate in gossip or offensive jokes, each time we choose the comfort of convenience over the challenge of living out our faith, each time we give God the blame for things we should be taking care of, we deny knowing Christ. Each time we choose to distort our faith to fit our will instead of molding our will to fit our faith, we deny Christ.

It's a reminder that even for us, affluent white Americans living comfortable lifestyles, true faith has a cost. A group of us just finished reading Heather McGhee's "The Sum of Us," an eye-opening book about how racism not only hurts people of color, but everyone. Some people would rather drain a public pool so no one can swim in it, rather than allow whites and blacks to swim together. And so much of the racism that plagues our country still exists because good, well-meaning white people like us haven't stood up to the racism we see, but have turned the other way, staying ignorant to how policies and practices have hurt everyone, not just people of color. There is a cost to claiming a life of faith in Christ, defined by the radical justice and equality Christ demonstrated. As one of those well-meaning white people, I felt convicted because on many occasions I've chosen comfort over advocacy. One author wrote, "Life shrinks or expands according to one's courage."

Like Peter, our lives will shrink or expand according to our choices. We will both embrace and deny the awesome presence of God in our lives. We will have moments of great faith and great doubt. Sometimes we will stand up for our faith, and at other times we will remain silent. We will at times choose to run back into the building, and other times choose to run away. That is why we need to recognize our need for God's grace in our lives. I believe God created us all as good people, but we won't always live up to the image of God inside of us. Our faith will flow with the abundance of God's generosity, and it will ebb as life challenges us to remain true to ourselves. And yet, like Peter, we will be given another chance to show our faithfulness, another opportunity to receive the gift of God's love and mercy.

You may not be where you want to be on your journey of faith. You may have had big plans when you first started believing, imagining that you would do great things for God's kingdom. But now, here you are, in the midst of responsibilities and demands and life's disappointments, big and small, and you realize that you more often deny Jesus than acknowledge him. Maybe you haven't run away, but you've walked away, step by step by step.

Here's the good news today: while you may have denied Jesus, he has never denied you. While it may feel like you are light years away from God, God has never left your side. While you may feel like it's too late or too hard or too inconvenient to move Jesus back toward the center of your life, Jesus is extending his hand and offering you another opportunity to know him, to follow him, to acknowledge him in your life.

In one of his own letters, which also made it into the Bible, Peter writes, "...and the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered for a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast." Sounds like someone who knows a little about running away, doesn't it? Peter will indeed become the rock on which Jesus builds his church. Jesus didn't choose a perfect person to do the job, because as long as human beings are involved, the church will never be perfect.

That means we are the perfect candidates to continue Peter's work of building the church, because we are similarly imperfect. Just like Peter, we are called to own up to our imperfections, to admit that we have run away, to claim the moments we have denied Jesus...and then to show up. Because Jesus isn't done with us yet. We'll hear the conclusion of Peter's journey next Sunday, but for now, we can take heart in the fact that while Peter ran away, while we run away, Jesus doesn't. With a heart full of love and grace and forgiveness, he runs after us.