

Theme: The Actions of Christ's Passion – “Denied”

Text: Luke 22:54b-62

54b But Peter followed at a distance. 55 Now when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. 56 And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him." 57 But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." 58 And after a little while another saw him and said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" 59 Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this *fellow* also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 62 So Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Peter, Peter, Peter! Each year during Lent most of us probably take some time to shake our heads in disbelief over Peter's foolishness during our Savior's arrest and trial. Just a few hours earlier impetuous Peter declared, "**Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death**" (Luke 22:33). When Jesus was arrested by His enemies in the garden, Peter proved his willingness to back up his promise by drawing his sword to fight even against the overwhelming odds. His promise did not last long, however, and it didn't take an army of Roman soldiers, or an excruciating torture device to evoke three denials of Christ from this fiery disciple. All it took was a harmless servant girl.

We, on the other hand, are not so impetuous or foolish as to make such an oath...or are we? Let me read to you some words that should be familiar to many of us here today: "*Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?*"

Do you recognize these words? This question—or at least one similar to it—was asked every one of you communicant members on the day of your confirmation. Do you remember what you answered? "*I do so intend, with the help of God.*"

We have made the same promise as Peter to remain faithful and confess our Lord Jesus and "*suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from Him.*" This should make us a bit uneasy, since this instance of Peter's denial of Christ should remind us that we too have at times denied Jesus by our thoughts, words, and actions in our lives. We, like Peter, have not perfectly kept our promise. However, our promise to confess our Savior even unto death is not exactly the same as Peter's, and in these differences lie our lessons for today as we consider the third "**Action of Christ's Passion:**" He was "**Denied.**"

God, our loving Father, wants us, His children, to pledge our lifelong love and faithfulness to Him. Taking an oath of this kind is not wrong. It is God pleasing. However, He does not want us to make our promise on the basis that Peter made his. Look again at his words as recorded in the Gospels: "**Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will**" (Matthew 26:33 NIV); "**Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death**" (Luke 22:33); and "**Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake**" (John 13:37).

Yet what do we read in the very first verse of our text, "**But Peter followed at a distance**" (v. 54b). Notice that Peter's promises were based on his confidence in himself: his own dedication, his own passion for his Savior Jesus, and his own deep level of affection for his friend. Confidence in our own abilities and faithfulness will not lead us to a closer walk with Christ, but rather, will lead us to distance ourselves from Him because of our human weakness and fear. Peter's weak faith caused him to fear the consequences of a close association with Jesus and so He followed Him only "**at a distance.**"

There is a big difference between promising, "**Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will,**" and "*I do so intend, with the help of God.*" The first is a promise based on our own feeble strength and willpower, while the one we made at our confirmation is based on the power of God's grace to keep us in that faith forever. This confidence in Christ is the key to a closer walk with Him, instead of "**following at a distance.**"

We all know what it means to "**follow at a distance,**" don't we? It's the type of "**following**" that we can unfortunately become very good at! Proudly and boldly confessing Christ as true God and true man, our Savior here in the friendly confines of our church family, but keeping this confession to ourselves in our lives that we lead outside these church walls. We are more than eager to stand up and confess the Apostle's Creed every Sunday and make an open confession of our faith in church, but when asked about our faith at work or with our friends the words are suddenly few and sound far less confident. We are proud to display our religious pictures and symbols of Christ here in the house of God, but in our own homes, or on our personal belongings—much less our own person—we suddenly feel like we don't want to be "that noticeable" as a follower of Christ. We want to follow, yes, but only "**at a distance.**"

As Peter demonstrated in our text, following Jesus "**at a distance**" leaves only a short step to complete denial when confrontation or temptation arises. I'd like to believe that each one of us—myself included—would be a rock of steadfast faith if it came down to a matter of confessing Christ at gunpoint, but that may never happen to any one of us in our lifetime. What will our confession be when the devil assaults us with a much more subtle confrontation or temptation, like the servant girl who said about Peter, "**This man was also with Him**" (v. 56)?

I can guarantee you that everyone of us here today will have incidents like this in our lifetime. This is not exactly news to any of you, but we don't exactly live in a "pro-Jesus," or "pro-Christian" area, so the chances of opposition or confrontation with the faith we confess in Christ is pretty high to say the least. How will we react? Will we react in fear and unbelief like Peter and deny our allegiance to Jesus?

We won't if we follow the advice that Jesus had given Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, "**Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak**" (Matthew 26:41). Jesus knows very well that the times we least expect it are the times temptation overtakes us and beats us. We might always be ready for the obvious temptations to sin and deny Christ, but we aren't always aware of the subtle temptations that Satan throws at us on a constant basis. That is why Jesus encourages a closer walk with Him through His Word and prayer.

This closer walk with Jesus will also help us when we fall—even if it's as far as Peter fell. How did Christ draw Peter back to Himself? We are told in our text, "**And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord (v. 61-62).**" This is how the Lord brings us back to His side as well. He uses His Word to bring us to a knowledge of our sins. This Word has been implanted in our hearts and minds and is used by God's Spirit to remind us, not only of His commands, but also to assure us of His forgiving love.

If you've noticed, this week's "**Action of Christ's Passion**" is very similar to last week's. They both involved the falling away of one of Jesus' disciples. As we learned last week, in "**betraying**" Jesus, Judas also "**denied**" Him. In the same way by "**denying**" Jesus, Peter also "**betrayed**" Him. When we look at the actions, thoughts, and words from our sin-filled lives God's Word convicts us of committing these very same unthinkable sins. There is a difference in this week's lesson, however. The difference is in the examples of how both of these disciples reacted to their fall from faith. They were both deeply sorry for what they had done to their friend and Savior. We are told in the Gospel of Matthew that Judas returned the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders and said, "**I have sinned by betraying innocent blood**" (Matthew 27:4). In the last verse of our text we read that **Peter went out and wept bitterly (v. 62).** The difference between these two examples was that Judas, in despair and unbelief hanged himself, while Peter turned to Jesus in faith for forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus knew that Peter would fall that night. He told Him, "**Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren**" (Luke 22:31-32). The Lord changed Peter's prideful heart through this incident and Peter later "**strengthened the brethren**" with these words from his first letter, "**But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.**" (1 Peter 3:15 NIV).

Jesus knows that we sinful, weak human beings will fall many times as well. He knows that there will be times in our lives when our words and actions give the clear impression that we are "**denying**" Him. When we fall, He wants each one of us to look to Him and His cross, and, like Peter, remember His words, "**I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren**" (Luke 22:32).

No matter what sins we have committed, no matter how many times we have fallen, Jesus wants us to confess them and return to Him for strength to say no to sin, comfort for our guilty conscience, and, most importantly, full, complete, and free forgiveness. He will never "**deny**" us. He promises us, "**If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself**" (2 Timothy 2:13). Amen.