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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #38

Peter's Denial of Jesus and the Look of Love
John 18:15-18, 25-27; Luke 22:61-62

[Once again I will combine the narratives of all four gospel authors in order to give us a complete portrayal of Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus. So, if you hear me citing details that you don't see in John 18, it is because I'm drawing them from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.]

The anguish of Gethsemane is over. Jesus has pressed through, submitting his will to the will of his Father. He will drink the cup that is prepared for him, the cup of God's righteous wrath and judgment against those for whom Jesus soon will give himself as a substitute on the cross.

As we've noted on several occasions before, the arresting party lays their hands on him; they seize him, something that they attempted to do on numerous prior occasions but failed. They failed because, as Jesus said repeatedly, "My hour has not yet come." But now his hour had arrived. The hour of his suffering for sinners has arrived. And so the invisible hand that had kept them at bay is lifted and Jesus is delivered over into their grasp.

We read here in John 18 that Peter followed Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. It was there that a "servant girl" approached him with words he feared he might hear. "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?" "No," responded Peter with no small measure of indignation.

A few moments later, several "servants and officers" who were standing with Peter around a charcoal fire likewise asked him: "Wait a minute. Aren't you one of the disciples of Jesus?" And he denied it.

You may recall from earlier in John 18 that the man whose ear Peter sliced off was named Malchus. He was the servant of the High Priest. One of his relatives was present around that fire. He recognized Peter and asked him a third time: "Didn't I see you in the garden with Jesus?" "No," shouted Peter, no doubt wishing that everyone would simply leave him alone.

And at once a rooster crowed.

Today I'm going to ask each of you to try as best you can to put yourself in the place of Peter. I want you to see these events unfold from his perspective. And most of all, I want you to feel what he felt. Why, you ask? Because you will probably never fully understand the reality of forgiveness until you do.

Is Forgiveness Possible?

Is forgiveness possible? It may sound like a silly question, especially to a Christian audience that I assume knows what the Bible says about God's grace and redemption and the forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ. But even for Christians, sometimes "forgiveness" is only a word lost in a stack of abstract theological language that we speak and confess and recite and even affirm in the liturgy.

But if you're anything like me, all that doesn't matter if I can't receive forgiveness into the depths of my soul and experience its liberating, life-changing power and taste its sweetness.

So, let me ask the question again: Is forgiveness possible? Can a thief be forgiven? What about an adulterer? What about a woman who's had an abortion, or a man who's paid for one? What about those failures, those

sins, committed long ago, forgotten by everyone else but still lingering in our spiritual memory, sins whose guilt and shame we carry around tucked away safely in our hearts? Is forgiveness possible?

Why is it so important for us to answer that question? Simply because *the only sin that can be defeated is a sin that has been forgiven*. There are countless natural ways to overcome bad habits and repeated failures: therapies, formulas, will-power, etc. But they all produce only self-righteousness, not the righteousness of God. In other words, *being right with God must precede doing right for God*. That's why our question is so crucial. Let me answer the question by directing your attention to the story that we've read today.

All of us have been in situations when we were desperate for a friend, just one person to stand with us to face the hard things in life. Jesus was no exception. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had often wanted to be alone. He would quietly slip away while the others were sleeping, hungry for solitude, for that rare moment alone with the Father, away from the pressure of the crowds and the endless questioning of the Pharisees. The last thing he wanted was someone to interrupt and hang around.

But that was then. This is now, the night of his betrayal. "You will all fall away because of me this night," said Jesus (Matt. 26:31). Not just any night, but "this" very night, the night Jesus and the disciples sat together in the upper room and enjoyed a depth of personal and spiritual intimacy perhaps unlike anything they had known before. *This* very night, said Jesus, "the night we ate together, prayed together, sang together . . . Notwithstanding this remarkable fellowship and love and joy we've shared, notwithstanding the depths of affection you feel for me now, in only a few short hours you will all abandon me."

"You will be offended by me," Jesus told them. "Your faith will turn to fear. At first sight of the enemy you will all turn tail and scamper away into the shadows like so many frightened pups. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matt. 26:31).

"Not me, Lord! No way!" Peter's protest was loud and arrogant. "Maybe John will abandon you. I mean, anyone so loving and tender has to be a little soft, a bit weak, especially when the chips are down. But not me! Not good old Peter! Hey, don't forget, Lord, I'm the Rock. You said so yourself. Remember?"

"Peter, let me tell you something," Jesus replied. "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (26:34).

But once again, Peter boldly begged to differ with Jesus. We can only imagine what more he might have said, or at least thought, in reaction to the dire prediction about him. Perhaps something like this: "I hear you Lord. And I don't mean to sound argumentative. But I'll never disown you. I'll die first! I can't speak for the others. Some of them aren't as strong as I am. They didn't walk on water like me. Sure, I know you selected each of them, Lord, but don't forget that Matthew was a tax-collector. It wouldn't surprise me to see him revert to his former ways. After all, greed and materialism aren't easily uprooted from the human heart. And I grew up with Andrew. If you only knew how often he's messed up. But not me, Lord. You can always count on old Peter!"

Instead of falling on his face and humbly pleading for gracious enablement to withstand the coming test, Peter implicitly accused Jesus of lying. But he wasn't alone in this, for "all the disciples said the same" (Matt. 26:35). We don't know what motivated them to chime in with Peter's protest. Perhaps they were sincere, or maybe they just didn't want to be outdone by Peter's declaration of love and loyalty. In any case, Jesus was right and they were wrong (see Matt. 26:56).

But wait a minute. *Maybe Peter really meant what he said*. Matthew tells us that Peter "was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end" (Matt. 26:58). What could Peter possibly have been thinking? Had he forgotten Jesus' prediction? It

had only been a few hours before. Was it already a fading memory? Or was he still puffed up with confidence in his own power to resist, determined to prove his Lord wrong?

The kangaroo court convened. Trumped-up charges. Lying witnesses. Accusations of blasphemy. And then the consummate indignity: “Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, ‘Prophesy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?’” (Matt. 26:67-8).

And where was Peter when Jesus needed him most? He was sitting outside in the courtyard. He eventually made his way to a fire to warm himself along with several others who were present. When that servant girl came up to him and asked if he was one of the disciples of Jesus, surely Peter would have said to himself:

“Well, finally. I’ve been waiting here patiently hoping someone would eventually recognize me and ask that question. Now I’ve got the opportunity to prove my point and demonstrate to everyone what I’m made of. At last, the chance to show how deep my loyalty runs and what kind of man I really am.”

Well, not quite.

Matthew says that “he denied it before them all, saying ‘I do not know what you mean’” (Matt. 26:70). It was a standoff: Peter, the Rock, the strong-armed, grizzled fisherman, face-to-face with . . . with . . . a “servant girl”? Surely not!

Had Peter been confronted by Pontius Pilate and threatened with immediate execution, perhaps we might understand (though by no means excuse) his failure. If it were Caiaphas, the high priest, or Annas, or a Roman soldier with a sword pressed perilously close to his throat, . . . but a “servant girl”? John Calvin was right:

“Here we see that it does not take a heavy fight to break a man, nor many forces and devices. Whoever is not dependent on God’s hand will soon fall, at a breath of wind or the noise of a falling leaf. Peter certainly was no less brave than any of us, and had already given no ordinary proof of his high courage (though his boldness was excessive). Yet he does not wait to be brought to the tribunal of the Pontiff, or until the enemy threatens his violent death, but, at the voice of a young woman, he is scared, and straight out denies his Master” (*A Harmony of the Gospels*, 3:170).

Frustrated and fearful, Peter sought an avenue of escape. He went out to the gateway but was again confronted, this time by . . . you guessed it, “another servant girl” (Matt. 26:71)! She said to the people there, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth” (Matt. 26:71). But Peter “denied it with an oath: ‘I do not know the man!’” (26:72).

When challenged yet a third time, “he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man!’” (Matt. 26:74). Peter not only invoked a solemn curse on himself should he be lying, but also upon his accusers should they persist in bringing such charges against him. Peter didn’t use profanity, as some have thought. His oath was in all likelihood an appeal to something sacred – used to reinforce the truth of his denial. Perhaps he said, “By all that is holy, I swear I don’t know the man!” Or, “With God as my witness, this man is a stranger to me!” Or, “I appeal to the sacred city Jerusalem that I am telling you the truth about him!” Adding insult to injury, he even refused to use the name of Jesus. He contemptuously and disdainfully refers to him as “the man.” How far he had fallen from that monumental confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Let’s be clear about one thing. My detailed portrayal of Peter’s sin is not designed to hold him up for public ridicule. I understand all too well Peter’s weakness. Don’t we all? Why, then, have I gone to such lengths

to describe his self-protective cowardice? I did it so that you and I might grasp the magnitude of God's forgiveness of us, so that we in turn might more readily forgive those who've betrayed and sinned against us. There are two remarkable events that make the point.

First, all four gospel authors record the crowing of the rooster. Luke, the beloved physician, alone tells us that at the precise moment of Peter's third denial, just as the rooster crowed, "***the Lord turned and looked at Peter***" (Luke 22:61).

Pause for a moment and consider the majesty of divine providence. Consider how the Father orchestrated this moment with such precision and beauty. There must have been dozens of people everywhere, running back and forth, caught up in the frenzy of the events of that night. Yet Jesus saw only Peter, and Peter saw only Jesus. Jesus is being shuttled back and forth, dragged through courtyards, in and out of rooms. Peter's loud cursing still echoed in the courtyard of Caiaphas, yet at precisely the moment the rooster crowed, Jesus turned and locked eyes with Peter! "And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61-62).

When Jesus turned and looked at Peter, he saw an angry and defiant man, a man whose adamant declarations of undying allegiance had withered at the sound of a servant girl's voice. But what did Peter see when he looked at Jesus? Into what kind of eyes did he gaze? On what kind of face did he look?

Was it the face of a well-groomed yuppie? Was it the face of a freshly washed, neatly manicured businessman? Was it the face of a nicely shaved, nattily attired politician? Hardly. I'll tell you what Peter saw. He looked into blackened eyes, virtually closed from the savage beating Jesus had endured. Bruised cheeks, swollen jaw, bloodied nose, with the vile and venomous spittle of his mockers dripping from his beard.

Peter looked with horror at the face of Jesus, barely recognizable. ***With what did Jesus look back at Peter?*** There are all sorts of "looks". Our eyes alone can communicate virtually every human emotion.

There is the flirtatious look that passes between two teens in the hallway at school.

There is the intimidating stare of two boxers in the middle of the ring.

There are the "looks that kill," the looks that pass between two people after one has abandoned and betrayed the other.

There is the "I-told-you-so" look, that unmistakable facial contortion reminding one of past failures and broken promises. It is a condescending glare, a look of smug superiority.

The look of anger is one we all know well. No words are necessary, only a disdainful sneer that says, "Some friend you turned out to be! Where were you when I needed you most?"

We've all been on the receiving (and sending) end of the look of resentment. I'm talking about one of those "after-all-I've-done-for-you-this-is-what-I-get-in-return" looks.

Perhaps the most painful look of all is the one of disappointment. Combined with a sad shaking of the head it says, "You sorry, no-good bum. I should have expected something like this from someone like you."

But how did Jesus look at Peter? Perhaps at this point each of us needs to ask ourselves: How does Jesus look at me when I fail him, deny him, turn my back on him?

Was it with disdain or disappointment or anger or resentment? I don't think so. I wasn't there. I can only speculate. Neither Matthew nor Mark nor Luke nor John tells us. But knowing Jesus as I do, and seeing Peter's response, I think I have a pretty good idea.

I think Jesus turned toward Peter with a look that he recognized immediately, a look of incredible power, enough to bring down the stone barriers of a military fortress. In this case it pierced the sinful walls of Peter's stricken heart. It was the same look Peter had seen so many times before: Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the woman taken in adultery, so many lepers and prostitutes and tax-collectors had been the focus of those penetrating eyes of love and hope and forgiveness. And then Peter remembered, and he went outside and wept bitterly.

So what did Peter see in those bruised and bloodied eyes? There were no words uttered, but the eyes of Jesus spoke loudly and clearly:

“It's OK Peter. I know your heart. I know that deep down inside you really do love me. I know the brokenness and devastation you feel right now. It really is OK. I still love you as much now as I ever did before. It's OK.”

It was more than Peter could believe. After what he'd done, knowing what he deserved, the eyes of Jesus said, “There's still hope.”

Second, I said earlier that there were two events that reveal to us the depths of forgiveness and the possibility for hope and restoration. We've seen the first in that remarkable look of love. What is the second?

Again, I'm only speculating, but I don't think this look of loving forgiveness was in itself enough to get Peter “over the hump” and “back in the game,” so to speak. It helped. Peter's broken heart was led to life-giving repentance. But something more needed to occur. Peter was probably still filled with self-doubt and anxiety, feeling disqualified as an apostle. I can almost hear him say: “Even if I'm forgiven, I can't believe Jesus would ever want to see me again. Even if he did, I'm probably forever disqualified from ministry. Better for everyone that I just slip away into the shadows.”

But Jesus wasn't yet done with Peter. We read in Mark 16:1-8 of the events on Sunday, after the Sabbath. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices so that they might anoint Jesus' body. When they arrive at the tomb, they are stunned to see the stone rolled away and an angel dressed in a white robe. His words to them:

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:6-7; emphasis mine).

I can imagine that the risen Christ gave explicit instructions to that angel! “Now listen carefully. When you tell the women to report back to the disciples that I'll meet them in Galilee, be absolutely certain you mention Peter by name. Single him out. Make a point of him so those women will know without a doubt that he is included.”

I wish I had been present to see the women rush into the room where the disciples had gathered. Out of breath, overcome by joy and indescribable excitement, they speak the words that none of the disciples ever expected to hear: “He has risen! The angel said to go to Galilee and Jesus would meet all of you there.” At

this point, I can almost imagine Peter, sitting in the corner, hiding in the shadows, hoping no one will notice his presence, saying to himself: “Well, that’s great. He’s alive. But there’s no way I’m going to Galilee. I can’t bear the thought of looking into his face again. Worse still, he probably can’t bear the thought of looking at me.”

“Oh, yeah. Peter,” shouted Mary and Salome, “he mentioned you specifically. I’m not sure why, but that angel made a point of using your name. He singled you out. You’re included. You’re supposed to come too. Jesus wants to see you.”

Unless I miss my guess, that was when “forgiveness” became more than just a word for Peter! The reality of restoration and hope and cleansing and a fresh start came flooding into his soul, wave upon wave of joy and gratitude and delight. And now it’s time for us to revisit, one final time, Paul’s exhortation to us all: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). And precisely how and to what extent has God forgiven us? Ask Peter.

Conclusion

Let me close with this word of strong encouragement. I strongly suspect that many of you, maybe even most, believe that you have so horribly failed in your Christian life that you tremble at the thought of looking Jesus in the eye. It may not be as bad as Peter’s denial of him. For some of you, it may be something even worse. But here is the only thing that matters. He still loves you. He’s still for you. He’s still here with you and has promised never, ever to leave you or forsake you.

Perhaps you live in fear of the second coming of Jesus. Perhaps the prospect of looking at him, or even more so, the prospect of him looking at you, is terrifying. I can assure you of this. Because of who he is, because of his unchanging character, because of the unbreakable promises he has made to you, because of his atoning death in your place and his bodily resurrection, when he looks you in the face you will see the look of love and forgiveness and grace and kindness. I’m absolutely certain that you will see what Peter saw: a look of undying, never-ending, heartfelt love and joy. Be encouraged Christian friend!