

Welcome Back to Worship

Pastor Jeff Wood

June 14, 2020

It is so goooood to see your faces but you're wearing masks so I can't see the *all* of your faces. Thank you for wearing them, however. I can't preach with a mask so we've got a buffer zone between chancel and pew. Even with masks it is so good to be together in the same room, isn't it? I feel a delight about that. Who would have thought we would have such a hankering, huh?

I was wondering about how to preach today. Because of finally getting back together to go to a passage like, "How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to be TOGETHER in unity?" To go to how worn out we may have become through this long-term ordeal that isn't even over yet and preach on the psalmist's question, "How long, O Lord"? To reach for the prophet saying, "Lift me up on wings like eagles," and adding to his words, "Us, too, please"? To look at our country and say something from the Bible about our current state of affairs? To be here today and to preach without acknowledging the protests of the week could feel like being wrongly oblivious with our faith. So, preaching today is a small conundrum.

The last two sermons the last two weeks of Pentecost have said that the Holy Spirit helped the early

Christians open up their hearts and helped them make strides over prejudice. Open up -- He helped them hold their possessions more loosely and to utilize them freely in the mission of God's heart. Move past prejudice – The Spirit helped the early believers not ignore but enfold the Hebrew-as-a-second-language immigrants in Jerusalem (or the shared-food getting to the Greek speaking widows). The Spirit helped the early Christians face and discuss their divisions. See Acts 15 as Jewish believers handled what to do with Gentile believers. Those works of the Spirit aren't very spiritual sounding *but they are nonetheless true*. We need today this work of the Spirit in us and through us and among us. May we all be Spirit-filled Christians, agents bringing people together and ending that which keeps us at odds.

One of the poster boys of the Spirit's work is Peter. He went from a tail-between-his legs guy to a bold stand-up-and-preach-it guy. He went from "I only associate with Jews" to "God wants me eating with Gentiles." These are moves of the Spirit in him, moves of empowerment and inclusivity. This happens when someone becomes Spirit-filled.

I want to look at pre-Pentecost Peter today with you as a way of looking at ourselves and our nation. There's something there that will help us. It isn't a silver bullet to be sure. But it is a step going down the path that's needed.

Read. John 18.

¹⁵ *Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard,¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in.*

¹⁷ *"You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter.*

He replied, "I am not."

¹⁸ *It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.*

²⁵ *Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So, they asked him, "You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?"*

He denied it, saying, "I am not."

²⁶ *One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?"²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.*

The pre-Pentecost Peter had bravado – he said he'd never desert Jesus; he pulled a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. Bravado-- bravado anchored in who Peter *thought* he was. Or, and maybe this is the same or slightly different, who he *wanted* to be or who he *believed* himself to be. The thing is that who one thinks they are, wants to be, believes they are ... may not be

true. I thought I was a patient person and then I got married and had kids and I realized that in many, many ways I am not patient. I thought I was patient. I wanted to be patient. I believed I was patient. But all that didn't make it so. They say wishing it were so, doesn't make it so and that's true here.

Peter thought he was heroic, loyal, and brave. Peter wanted to be heroic, loyal, and brave. Peter believed he was heroic, loyal, and brave. But then came that night in which Jesus was betrayed. Peter deserted Jesus along with the others in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter denied Jesus three times ... even to a little, servant girl. Peter's bravado and self-image deserted him and he deserted Jesus. He wasn't who he thought he was. Three denials is more than "by accident." Denial brought on by stress; denial brought on by fear. Self-preservation took over and bulldozed down his ideals.

How has this happened *for you*? Maybe you thought you were impervious to that temptation – an affair, cutting corners on a job, getting hooked on pills... or to looking down on people ... and then you look down on people who had an affair, cut corners, or got hooked on pills. Or you look down on people who look down on people. You found yourself succumbing to one of those, all of those, or something different from those. Greed, or fear, or something bulldozed it down.

You may think, like me, that you are patient. You want to think you are that way. You see yourself

that way. The quarantine goes on and you get more irritable ... patience is leaving the scene. Then that Democratic relative says one more crazy thing, that Republican relative says one more crazy thing ... and snap! There's go Mr. Patience.

Or as a nation we see ourselves one way. We want to be a nation of justice, of equality, of fairness, of truth ... and then there's a death ... and the real problem is it is yet *another* death. It happened. A failure. It shouldn't have happened ... and certainly not many times over. We should be doing better. We are not where we want to be. And we're angry and dismayed and defensive at realizing we may not be who we thought we were, dismayed that we are not yet the way we want to be – as persons... as a nation.

Like Peter we can, if this is the way to put it, as off as it may sound ... we can be grateful for the hard grace which shows us our illusions and short-comings so we don't completely act like we are not that way. We can be more real. Success and confidence are very good but exclusively they are not soil for looking at chinks in our armor and getting humble and looking for help. Peter got the hard grace of being able to see himself in a more humble way.

Peter got to see that he cannot live up to his ideals. Maybe he can on a good day but not on all days. Even the ideals that are God-implanted. When we fail, and we'll do this as a nation too, and it isn't that we shouldn't, we'll roll up our sleeves and try harder. That

is a necessary part, it just isn't the necessary start. You see, I think the reason that Peter lied three times is that three is a complete number, that the number says you can try and try and try but this is going to come out. It isn't an "accident." We know what we should do, we just don't have the power to do what we should do. That's the illusion to come down.

Now here's the thing -- while Peter's denial was a surprise to him, maybe even a shock to him, a matter causing huge dismay and probably nausea and shame, *it wasn't to Jesus*. Jesus knew it. That's why he told Peter ahead of time. He told him so that when Peter came to the realization of his failure, that Peter would also realize Jesus understood his failure before Peter did.

He didn't tell Peter all that with a forewarned forearmed idea. If that was Jesus' principle concern, he could have arranged it that Peter didn't end up in those fraught circumstances. Jesus could have arranged it for Peter to have laryngitis or lock-jaw so he couldn't deny Jesus. He could have arranged it that Peter stayed at the gate outside and wouldn't have had anybody there to question him. But Jesus didn't do that because he wanted Peter to see himself, to give up on doing his ideals himself. He wanted Peter to see that it was never about what Peter could do for Jesus but getting Peter to understand what Jesus could do, and what Peter needed Jesus to do, for him.

Jesus wanted Peter to come to a place where he could be empowered by his love and empowered by his

Spirit. Love – Jesus had always known completely who Peter was and he still wanted him. He knew what Peter would do and he still wanted him. His love, again, wasn't about what Peter could do for him but what he could do for Peter.

This nation, and all the nations, God loves as he did Peter. It doesn't mean that we should just make mistakes. But it means that God loves us understanding our mistakes and wanting to give us through his love the power to live better.

Spirit – when we realize our need we can be open that Jesus wants to give us his Spirit. We were always meant to live in collaborative, empowered communion with God. Without him we don't have what we need to live well. But Jesus gives his Spirit so that in Christ, in union with Christ, we can have his heart pumping spiritual blood in our lives, his lungs putting spiritual oxygen into our systems, his mind putting spiritual thoughts into our heads. Trying is a necessary part but the necessary start is realizing we can't do without Jesus but we do it with Jesus. This is true for us in this room and it is true for us as a nation, and for any nation.

Open your life to Jesus and be a person who helps our country open our need to him as well. The word of the Lord.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com. Also see welovefirst.org or facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian