

I want to share with you this morning two dictionary definitions of two words. **Trial:** “An examination of the facts of a case by a court to decide the validity of a charge or claim.” Last week I said that Jesus’ trial was not a legitimate trial because, as Mark records, “*Many testified falsely against him*” (v. 56). And Mark goes on to say, “*Jesus remained silent...*” (v. 61). So, no defense was given for the charges made against him, even if they were false. This so-called trial was a bogus trial. The second word is **Denial:** “A disowning or repudiation of someone or something.” The denial we just read about was authentic and real.

Schutt Sports, a major supplier of football helmets for the National Football League, issued the following WARNING LABEL on all their helmets and on their website’s homepage: WARNING. NO HELMET SYSTEM CAN PREVENT CONCUSSIONS OR ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SERIOUS HEAD OR NECK INJURIES WHILE PLAYING FOOTBALL. The warning label includes this succinct warning: “TO AVOID THESE RISKS, DO NOT ENGAGE IN THE SPORT OF FOOTBALL.” A visitor to their website can’t access any content without checking a box next to the words “Please indicate that you have read and understand [this warning label].” At least this company is utterly honest about the risks of playing football. In a similar way, the Bible is totally honest about the risks of following Jesus. In places the Bible seems to say, “TO AVOID THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH FOLLOWING JESUS, DO NOT ENGAGE IN FOLLOWING JESUS.” We will see today how risky it was for Peter to follow Jesus, but also how rewarding it was.

Now, if Jesus came walking into the church today and said to us, “**One of you** is going to betray me this week.” Most of us would start thinking about which one of us is going to do this awful thing and when he or she is going to do it.” But what would happen if Jesus says, “**All of you** are going to deny me this week.” What images begin to swirl around in your head? Would we think, “They might, but not me?” If that kind of thought has ever crossed your mind, today is a day to turn to God and to thank God for giving us a second chance.

Peter was one of the top three of Jesus' disciples. Jesus pointed out that not only was Peter in the top three, he should be considered the number one disciple. Do you remember the exchange that Jesus had with Peter after the Last Supper, before they go to Gethsemane? Here's Mark's account of the conversation: *"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."* Peter declared, *"Even if all fall away, I will not."* *"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times"* (Mark 14:27-30).

You would think that might have ended the discussion, but it didn't. Peter responded one more time: *But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."* *And all the others said the same* (v. 31). His words inspired (or mortified) all the other disciples so that they said the very same thing. They all made the same commitment, but they obviously did not understand the cost associated with what they were saying or the risk of following Jesus—in the direction he was about to go.

When God tells us that we are going to disown him, he not only knows what the future holds, but God knows what's in the human heart. When things aren't going our way, or the way we expected them to go, it is far too easy to betray, deny, or disown our Lord. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, all of the disciples were ready to fight to the death. One of them pulled out a sword and cut off one the attacker's ears, as we saw last Sunday. Mark's gospel describes Jesus' response: *"Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled."* *Then everyone deserted him and fled.* (Mark 14:48-50).

Yet v. 54 tells us Peter *"followed at a distance"* when they took Jesus away, to see what was going to happen to him. In the courtyard of the high priest *"he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire"* (v. 54). But once he was in the courtyard people began to recognize him. He was trying to keep warm when one of the servant girls of the high priest came along, and said, *"You also were*

with that Nazarene, Jesus.” But Peter denied it. Wanting to get rid of her, he said, *“I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about.”* Trying to blend into the crowd he got up and went out to the entryway. *“When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.”*

Peter apparently did not know how to keep his mouth shut either, because people listening closely to him heard his accent and said, *“Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”* What does he do? Well, he must be getting scared by this time because, *“He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, I don’t know this man you’re talking about”* (v. 71). As the words rolled off his tongue, the rooster crows twice, just as Jesus said it would. Do you suppose it would be helpful if each time we disowned Christ we heard a rooster crow? The instant Peter heard the rooster, the words of Jesus echoed in his head, *“And he broke down and wept”* (v. 72).

Some of us know the feeling of having the weight of what we’ve said or done come down on us all at once. It is a burden that becomes too heavy to bear. Carrying that burden in secret for as long as possible, however, does nothing to restore our relationship with Jesus or with others. I sincerely think that Peter never expected to get to this point. Jesus had told him he was going to be the *rock* upon which the church would be built. If we had seen Peter at that moment, crying bitterly, what would we have seen? A person who was a phony? A person who was a failure? A person who could no longer be trusted? None of those things. Instead you would see a person who was on his way back to a restored relationship with God in Christ, in order to be equipped and prepared for meaningful living and serving in the name of Jesus Christ.

Most often all we can see in our lives or in the lives of others is the failure of the moment. But I want to say to you: No Peter bashing will be allowed here today! Do you honestly think that we could do any better? A person’s point of failure is not always the best place from which to judge that person. There is much more to a person than what we see in the moment. Be slow to criticize. When we fail, Jesus sees us before the failure, during the failure and after the

failure all in the same moment of time. That it is why in Luke 22 Jesus tells Peter, “*Satan has asked permission to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith will not fail and after you are restored, you will strengthen your brothers.*” Jesus was telling Peter in advance not to give up. Now, consider this thought for a moment...

There were no other disciples that we know of in the courtyard when Peter denied Jesus three times. So how do you suppose this story made it into the gospel account? Peter at some point must have humbled himself before the other disciples and told them, “Fellows, I need to tell you how I disowned the Lord; three times I denied knowing him. Forgive me for my boasting, for thinking I was somehow better than the rest of you.” His repentance led to a change in his attitude and, no doubt, in his status with the other disciples.

There’s a wonderful story at the end of John’s gospel that gives a hopeful and new perspective on Peter. After Jesus was raised from the dead he appears to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee in John 21. Jesus says to Peter, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*” What does he mean by that? Can you love Jesus when it’s just you and Jesus and nobody else notices what you’re doing? Can you love Jesus, because you know he died for you and without him you have no hope? Can you love Jesus more than life itself?

Jesus seems to be letting all of us know that he is entirely aware of Peter’s three failures in the courtyard of the high priest. After all, he was there. Remember? But he is more interested in Peter’s present affirmation of love, than his past moments of weakness. Peter is still going to be the *rock* upon which the church will be built. It was terribly painful for Peter to be reminded by Jesus that he disowned him not once, but three times. It was also painful to be humbled in front of the others. But there was no doubt that Peter had been forgiven and restored to the place God had for him after that day with Jesus along the sea.

How good is the good news of the gospel? As it turns out, it’s far better for Peter than he ever imagined. And that means, the Lord be praised, that for us it’s far better than we ever imagined. Thank God for second chances! Amen.