

THE SEED OF FORGIVENESS IN THE SOIL OF DENIAL
Luke 22:54-62

In our Junior High gym class, the coaches must have had fun coming up with a new way to torture us. Someone came up with the great idea of square dancing. They would give us a week before starting, then the girls would select their partner from the guys. (Yet another way to humiliate and embarrass a junior high guy!) Well, I had been talking to a cute girl named Cindy. A couple of other guys wanted her to pick them, but she said she would pick me as her square dance partner. The big day came. The girls were lined up under the basketball goal; the guys were at the free throw line. They went down the line with each girl picking a guy. Then it was Cindy's turn. I started to step forward, and she called out Chester's name! Chester! He was one of the quietest, brainiest guys, big ears like a monkey, and Cindy picked him! I felt like she denied even knowing me! She never did give me an explanation. However she and Chester dated all through high school and got married. He became a doctor; she became a nurse. Then she ended up picking another doctor and ran off. I forgave her. Apparently it was a real character flaw.

Cindy wasn't unique. Every one of us has the same character flaw. We have all denied someone who trusted us to stand by them at one time or another. In school we had a dorky friend growing up. We have a chance to get into the cool crowd, and we deny even knowing our friend. Sometimes we do it in church. We have a fellow Christian, who we worship with, fellowship with, minister with – but at school or work we don't give them the time of day. What is it like to have a close friend deny knowing you?

On Palm Sunday, Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem like a king. Everyone was cheering Him as the Messiah, the Son of David, waving palm branches, which were symbols of victory. "Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord!" The paparazzi were flashing pictures, young, giggling Jewish girls were asking for the disciples' autographs. His entourage of disciples was hanging close to Jesus. They were in the limelight, too. They were right next to Jesus. They wanted to be identified as one of Jesus' disciples. They were probably smiling and waving. After all, they were His disciples. Especially Peter, Jesus' right hand man.

It is believed that Peter was the oldest of the disciples, probably about 20 or 21 years old. His real name was Simon bar Jonah, but Jesus nicknamed him, "Peter," from the Greek *petros* which means "The Rock." (Dwayne Johnson had nothing on him!)

Just 4 days later, Jesus gathered his closest friends on earth, the 12 men who had followed Him. They shared the Passover Seder together. Jesus broke the Passover bread and said, "This is my body; Take and eat." Then after supper he took the Passover cup of redemption, gave it to them and said, "Drink this, for this is my blood of the new covenant." They probably didn't understand everything that He meant, but they did it, anyway. (All but one – the other 11 were wondering where in the world did Judas go?) They finished Passover, and went out for an evening walk with Jesus, after a big meal. They can't figure out why Jesus is so sad. Then as they walk along the Kidron Valley, starting up the side of the Mount of Olives to an olive grove there, Jesus drops this bombshell:

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

"I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.
Matthew 26:31-35

Then as they find the spot called, Gethsemane, Jesus asks Peter, James and John to come aside and pray with Him, as Jesus goes a little further, and agonizes over what is about to happen. Peter, James and John fall asleep. Judas Iscariot emerges from the shadows leading a group of soldiers to arrest Jesus.

Peter jumps up and tries to defend Jesus. He pulls out a sword and attacks one of the high priest servants, and cuts off his right ear. (That would be a very aggressive attack mode, also making Peter left handed – unless he came up from behind and cut off the right ear – sorry, I watch too much CSI on TV!) But Jesus tells Peter and the disciples not to fight. Then the gospels say, "All of them deserted Him and fled."

But Luke adds something different, which is an interesting statement in verse 54, "Peter followed, but from a safe distance." That is an intriguing phrase to me. I think I have done that at times – followed Jesus at a safe distance. Close enough to see Him, but far enough not to be identified with Him and all that it means – like being crucified with Him. Far enough to run away, if I have to. How about you? Are you following Jesus, but from a safe distance?" No risk; no discipleship.

I have often wondered, "What did Peter think he was going to do?" Was Peter waiting for an opportunity to rescue Jesus? Seems like it. He snuck into the courtyard of the High Priest where they were holding Jesus, questioning Him, beating Him. Peter is struggling with how he is going to do this, what will he do? Then a young woman says, "Didn't I see you with Jesus the other day?" (I had my picture taken with you giving the V for victory sign.) Peter responds, "Lady, I don't even know the guy." Another insisted, "Sure you were with Him, you gave my son an autograph," Peter: "I don't know Him!"

Have you ever heard of the "Duck Test?" "If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, swims like a duck with other ducks, it must be a duck!" Peter sounds like a disciple; looks like a disciple, hangs out with other disciples of Jesus – he must be a disciple. "Hey, don't you go to church? Are you one of those Christians, holy rollers, goody two shoes? Don't you read your Bible and pray? I'm sure I saw you bow your head and mumble a few words before you ate your lunch." So do you look like a disciple, talk like a disciple, act like a disciple of Jesus, or do you look, talk and act like something else? We deny Jesus in a thousand ways with our words and our actions that say, "I tell you, I don't know Him."

After Peter denied Jesus the first two times, Luke says an hour later, someone asked again (what was going on in Peter's mind during that hour?), and for the third time Peter said, "I don't know Him!" The words hardly came out of his mouth when the rooster crowed, and Jesus looked directly at Peter. Imagine - Peter has been sitting there comfortably in the warmth of the fire for over an hour, (actually all night) not saying a word in protest, not doing a thing, watching Jesus get interrogated, tortured and brutally beaten. This is not a stranger - this is your best friend, your teacher, your Master, your Lord. Then after all of this you deny Jesus for the third time, and He looks directly at you. Peter fell apart.

With each denial, Peter dug a hole for himself - deeper and deeper - and the sides of that hole caved in on him, when he realized what he had done. What now? Peter went out and wept. Then he most likely went and hid in the upper room, trying to be the leader, looking for any speck of news about what was happening, while all the time, filled with shame. Somehow we have got to emerge from the stinking soil of denial, to rise up in forgiveness. Unconfessed sin can quickly turn to shame. And shame can destroy us. It moves us from saying, "I did something bad" to saying, "I am bad. I am a bad person."

Forgiveness came for Peter after Jesus rose from the dead, along a beach on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said He would meet them in Galilee. The disciples get tired of waiting for Jesus. They go fishing one night and catch nothing. Someone appears along the shoreline and tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and they catch a net full of fish. John says, "It's the Lord!" and Peter jumps in the water swimming ashore to meet Jesus. Jesus already has breakfast cooked for them. They eat but there is this awkward silence. They are all ashamed. They all ran out on Jesus. Peter is ashamed the most. Jesus takes Peter for a walk and asks him 3 times, "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!" "Then feed my sheep."

Forgiveness is liberating - it frees us up to serve Jesus. One of the great ministries some of our members participate in is a prison ministry called, Kairos. Ricky and I have both served in prison ... at Kairos weekend retreats inside of the prisons. Others here have been very active. The most powerful night of the weekend is Friday night when a talk is given about God's forgiveness. I have seen hardened criminals break down in tears, when they realized and accepted the forgiveness Jesus offered to them. Many then learn to serve others in prison ministry. Only in Christ Jesus our Lord can forgiveness come bursting forth out of the soil of our denial, sin and shame, to bloom into something wonderful that will bless others.

On Palm Sunday we're always willing to follow and be closely identified with Jesus when it is popular to do, but then on Good Friday, where are we - when Jesus is rejected and beaten. You are there in the courtyard of your enemies watching. What will you say when they ask if you know Him?

Let's face it, all of us are going to deny something. I think it boils down to one of two things. We are either going to deny Jesus, and bury ourselves in regret and shame. Or

we will deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Him. How are you doing with that? Who are you denying these days?

Whatever the case, there is grace enough for you and me. Jesus suffered the Cross, shed His blood for us, so that we could be forgiven of all the denials, the guilt and the shame. Pray as fervently as you think Peter would have prayed. Your denial is just as real. But then find forgiveness from Jesus, just as Peter found forgiveness. And do only what the forgiven can do - rise up, take up your cross in joy and follow Him.