

**Lent 3 March 4, 2018 Manor Road United Church Rev. Debra K. Schneider**  
**John 18:12 – 27 I am... I am not!**

The woman at the gate asks Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples are you?"

Peter has been with Jesus since the very beginning. I have this beautiful card. On the front, it says, "On the brink of a new life adventure. Hearts side by side, spirits flying free.. Looking out with joy to the wonder of a shared tomorrow." So it had been in those early days of following Jesus... and Peter had been there since those days... those days when anything seemed possible!

Later on, when the winds have shifted and Jesus' teaching about eating his body and drinking his blood has driven more casual disciples away, he asks the Twelve, "Will you also leave me?" It is Peter who replies, "To whom will we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." And now, along with the other disciples, Peter has travelled back to Judea, back to Jerusalem, knowing that there are those seeking Jesus' life there—knowing that they too risk dying with him.

Still, Peter has pledged his loyalty, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you!"

Jesus has warned them, "You will all be scattered," and he tells Peter directly, "... before the cock crows you will have denied me three times." That same night, Jesus and the disciples are in the garden for a time of solitude, conversation and prayer when the temple officials and their servants come to arrest him.

Peter takes his sword and strikes off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus tells him to put away his sword. He asks Peter, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

And now, Jesus stands before the High Priest, responding clearly, truthfully, and directly to the questions put to him, declaring, "I have said or done nothing in secret, but have done everything out in the open. Ask anyone you like about me, ask about the things I have been saying and doing!

Jesus doesn't add, but the insinuation is surely clear, "Why bring me here under the cover of night to ask me these questions?"

And, Peter stands at the gate, and declares to the woman, "I am not." I am not one of his disciples!" What is it that we hear in Peter's voice? Is it fear? Confusion? Disillusionment? Despair? Is it sorrow? Anger? Cynicism?

Jesus stands before the authorities...speaking clearly, honestly, truthfully... Peter stands among the servants and officers... mumbling, "I am not." His body disagrees. The fact is, only he and one other disciple remain. The rest have scattered into the night as Jesus has predicted. But, Peter cannot walk away from Jesus. He doesn't know what to do, or what to say; but he will stay. He will be a witness. Even though... already, as Jesus has predicted, he has denied that he is Jesus' disciple.

Thoughts, hopes, and memories roil through his mind: How can I be a disciple of a crucified messiah? How can I be a disciple of a crucified messiah? I've left everything behind. I've given up everything to follow him... everything. I've been faithful. I've been loyal. I was ready to fight for him. I would have died for him. I was ready to rule with him!

And Jesus would have none of it! None of it.

"My kingdom is not of this world," he said. What on earth can that mean?

And now... Jesus stands before the authorities, and as sure as night follows day... he will be crucified. Crucified, dead, and buried. "How can I be a disciple of a crucified messiah?"

Franciscan writer and teacher, Richard Rohr, writes, "To stay on the ride, to trust the trajectory, to know it is moving somewhere better is just another way to describe the biblical notion of faith." "To stay on the ride, to trust the trajectory, to know it is moving somewhere better is just another way to describe the biblical notion of faith." But, the truth of the matter is that sometimes you have to step off the ride for a while, before you can begin to trust again--trust yourself again, trust God again, and to figure out a way forward.

After Jesus is crucified, Peter goes back fishing. Some of the other disciples go with him.

All of them struggle with deep questions, "How can I be the disciple of a crucified messiah?" "What can that even look like?" "What can it mean?" And, "What is this kingdom, not of this world?"

The truth is, we still struggle with these questions. It seems that the answers must be interpreted, understood and experienced anew in every generation.

It wasn't that Jesus had not tried to prepare them! In John's gospel, more than all the rest, Jesus goes to great lengths to try to prepare the disciples for what is about to happen. He has told them that he will die, so that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter will come to them, will be with them, in them and will lead them into all truth--

even as this same Spirit has done in him. He has told them that the Holy Spirit will allow them to do even greater things than he has done. And he has promised that he will be with them, 'even to the end of the age.'

The truth is, such words are simply not enough!

That's one of the reasons teenaged suicide runs so high. Teenagers often don't have the life experience that allows them know that they can get through difficult times, and come out stronger... that they can move on from whatever catastrophe has beset them.. that they can go from strength to strength into the future.... not in spite of, but because of what life has thrown at them. In the midst of a severe teenaged angst... words often hold little sway. These kinds of truths need to be discovered deep in our bones—they need to be experienced in order to be believed and understood.

Another truth is, when our world falls apart, we need to be accompanied, supported, encouraged...We need time to make sense of what has happened, to figure a way forward, and to find the strength and courage that does reside within us.

The other night, Tim Kneath told me a story of a speaker he heard at a recent conference in Atlanta, Georgia. I've asked Tim if he would come and share a bit of that story with you this morning. ... Inspiring story of John O'Leary...

Jesus rarely traveled or prayed alone. He was always in the company of those who had become his disciples. When Peter went back fishing, he didn't go by himself. Why is it that we in our culture so often feel that we have to go it alone? Why are we so afraid to be vulnerable and open to one another in our pain, or sorrow, or bewilderment?

I ask you to consider the possibility that one of the reasons we are here this morning is to help one another—that we are here to support and encourage one another, and that we are here to remind each another that there is a surprising strength deep within us all--if only we will simply stay on the ride, trust the trajectory of faith, and know, deep in our bones, that the Holy Spirit is always moving us forward, to places and purposes beyond anything we might think, dream, or imagine. Only when we find this place of faith... will we be enabled to truly shine as a light in this community, and to serve as a place of transformation in and for our world.