

Faces of Failure: Peter  
Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

I read a saying this week that seemed appropriate for our series on Faces of Failure. “It may be your purpose in life to simply serve as a warning to others.”

One could certainly apply that to those we have been considering. Nicodemus warns us about the failure of imagination. The disciples illustrate what happens when we fail to trust Jesus. Jesus family reveal what willful blindness to Jesus and his work looks like. Then we saw the failure of lost hope overwhelm Judas Iscariot. Each of these biblical characters could serve as a warning to us and, as a reminder of God’s grace. That is certainly true of our focus for today, Simon Peter.

On the night Jesus was arrested, he had celebrated a final meal with his disciples. Following the meal, they sang a Psalm and went to the Mount of Olives, where many of those in Jerusalem for Passover were encamped. There Jesus tells his disciples that they will soon be scandalized by him and “fall away.”

I am not sure why that news startles the disciples. Jesus has already told them he will be betrayed, arrested, tried, and executed. What did they think they would do when Jesus is arrested? Stand stoically while men with swords haul Jesus away? Apparently, they hadn’t even thought about it until Jesus says they will, as Zechariah has foretold, scatter like sheep whose shepherd has been struck down.

As is usually the case, Simon Peter is the first to respond to Jesus. And he makes a bold promise. “Though they all fall away because of you,” he says, “I will never fall away.” And it’s not just that he won’t fall away from Jesus that night. No, he says he will “never fall away.” He even says he won’t deny Jesus even if it means dying with him.

That’s an incredible promise, and Jesus warns him not to make it. He even tells him that before the night is through, he will break his promise three times. But this is Peter, and Peter doesn’t lack self-confidence. He is, after all, first among Jesus’s disciples as well as the group’s spokesman.

Peter’s promise to never fall away is another example of his devotion to Jesus. He believes in him. He loves him. He wants to be faithful, and he promises to do so. And isn’t that what all followers of Jesus do?

A short while after Peter makes his promise, those sent to seize Jesus arrive. When they do, the prophecy of which Jesus spoke is fulfilled: “All the disciples left him and fled.”

Peter flees as well, but he doesn’t go far. He stays close enough to follow the crowd to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the religious leaders are conducting something of a preliminary hearing about Jesus. There Peter finds a safe spot in the courtyard close enough to see what’s happening but not close enough to catch anyone’s eye he thinks. But a servant girl recognizes him and confronts him is, “You were with Jesus the Galilean,” she says.

Peter’s heart must have started racing and his thoughts must have started spinning. And the only thing he can think of doing is play dumb. “I don’t know what you mean,” he says, before moving to a place nearer the entrance.

Unfortunately, Peter finds no relief there. Another servant girl recognizes him and says to those standing nearby: “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” Although she doesn’t address Peter, he knows he must respond. He swears that he doesn’t know “the man,” as if Jesus were a stranger to him.

You might think that, at this point, Peter would slip into the darkness and disappear. But you must give him credit for staying. He has promised to be faithful, and although he has been less than forthright about his relationship with Jesus, he still refuses to abandon him completely. Instead, he hangs out in the shadows as near to Jesus as he can without being noticed.

But he doesn’t go unnoticed. Some in the crowd come to him. “You are one of them,” they say. Once again, Peter is put on the spot, and once again Peter denies knowing Jesus. Peter soon hears the cock crow and knows he has failed. He has failed to keep his promise to never deny Jesus. And so, he goes out and weeps bitterly.

I’m sure fear plays a part in Peter’s failure. Seeing Jesus arrested, he has reason to be anxious. But fear is only part of the problem. The real issue is Peter’s arrogance. When Peter sits across from Jesus and promises to remain faithful, he assumes he has it within himself to do it. He arrogantly assumes he can, on his own power, face down the powers and principalities that might come upon him. But when the moment comes to stand for Jesus, he is too weak, cowardly, and fragile to do so. He crumbles not under the stern gaze of great authority or under the lash of an inquisitor but before people who don’t matter.

In our baptism, we pledge to remain faithful to Jesus. We promise to love God and neighbor; to live lives that reflect God’s love, peace, generosity, and compassion; to testify to what God has done so that others might know God’s grace.

But, like Peter, we find the promise hard to keep. Oh, we self-confidently assume we can, by sheer will, remain faithful to Jesus. But then a neighbor’s late-night party disrupts our sleep and loving him or her becomes almost impossible. A driver cuts us off and anger not peace seizes control of our thoughts. A friend opens the door to a conversation about Christ, but we play dumb, or we act as if we know nothing about Christ or the faith.

It’s not that we fear persecution at the hands of the government or ridicule by people in the public square. Failure under such circumstances might even be understandable. But we are simply too human. We are too weak, cowardly, and fragile to keep the promise even before those who lack power or status, the servant girls of our day. We simply don’t have it within us to stay with Jesus.

Fortunately, Peter’s story doesn’t end with him weeping in darkness and neither does ours. After the resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples on multiple occasions. The most important one for Peter takes place in Galilee, where he and some of the others have returned to fishing. On the seashore one morning, Jesus says to Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” Peter replies: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus says. He ask Peter a second time And then a third time: “Do you love me?” Peter replies, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.”

Jesus goes on then to explain to Peter what life is going to be like. Where once he controlled his own destiny, now it is in the hands of others. Where he once went where he wanted, now others will direct his path. Where once his life was his own, now it will be determined, and ultimately taken, by others.

And then, after all that, Jesus repeats the very first words he ever spoke to Peter. Two simple words: “Follow me.”

In our baptism or confirmation, we promised to remain faithful to God. I’m sure there have been occasions in which you have thought, “Yes, I did it. I did what Jesus asked.” But I know for sure there have been times in which we didn’t do what the Lord requires. I’m sure there have been times in which your strength, courage, and perseverance failed. I’m sure there have been times in which you, like Peter, dreaded the thought of Christ’s eyes meeting your own.

And yet Peter is an example that our failures are not fatal. They can instead be freeing. They remind us that the Christ who gave grace to a broken Peter gives grace to us as well. They remind us that the same Christ who spoke to the big fisherman, still says to us, “Follow me.” But most of all, they remind us that the same Christ who empowered a humbled Peter empowers a humbled you and humbled me. And it is in Christ power, courage, and tenacity that you and I can find the strength to keep our promise to never fall away.