

Peter's Denial

Text: Luke 22:54-62

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010

First Presbyterian Church of Ypsilanti

It's a phenomenon to be observed in any social situation—people gathering in circles, making conversation with friends, and then an outsider coming up on the circle, wondering if it would be possible to fit in. You see it on a college campus at student parties, at church during fellowship time, at work among gatherings in the hallways. The circle, and the outsider. Perhaps its oldest form was the human circle gathered around the fire for warmth—one of the most basic of human gestures.

So Peter finds himself alone in a strange city, with as Mark records a Galilean accent, and no friends—the teacher, the master, this strange rabbi who maybe in wild imagining had been more than a teacher or a master, more than any human possibility, now led off to arrest and probable execution. The other disciples fled. Peter himself terrified of getting arrested. So on the darkest and coldest night of his life, all he wants to do is to join the circle and get a warmth by the fire.

But this servant girl will not remain silent. I've always wondered at her persistence. Twice she says: you were one of his disciples. Then the bystanders pick up the accusation: "This man also was with him." "Surely this man also was with him." Why did she care about the poor Peter, this servant girl? Maybe she had a hard life too—working the night shift, always at beck and call, there in a courtyard with crooks and police, hangers-on and soldiers. Maybe she got jokes and whistles and pinches

and worse. And here finally she has a chance to be superior to someone else, to pick on Peter, to identify him as the real outsider.

But no, he says, I am not one of them. I do not know what you are talking about. I do not even know this Jesus, this convicted criminal. I belong to your comfortable circle around the fire.

Isn't this too one of the most characteristic of human gestures? If I'm not sure of my place in the social circle, I try to establish it by my loud rejection of someone even more an outsider than I am. Watch little kids on the playground. The kid who wants to belong, but isn't sure he fits in, will make fun of the other kid who doesn't fit in at all. In the old days of fraternity hazing, it was always the freshman who had just barely made it who turned into the sophomore terror of pledges. It's often the young men insecure about their own masculinity who side-step any vulnerability and tell nasty jokes about others. Or the girl unsure of her self-worth who is most judgmental about who else can belong. I'm an insider we want to shout out, I fit in, and the proof of it is that I'm as distant as possible from those real outsiders.

But notice what happens to Peter. In the act of trying to fit into this little circle around the fire, the outsider he distances himself from is Jesus. And when the truth of that sinks in, all he can do is to break down and weep.

Can I suggest that the same is true for us? Jesus is always the outsider, the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of

suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account” [Isaiah 53:2]. And so, whenever we try to establish a nice, comfortable little community of insiders by excluding those people who don’t fit in, who aren’t by our rules socially acceptable, one of the people we exclude is Jesus.

Therefore, the challenge of following Jesus is to create communities that welcome rather than exclude, to keep saying in the face of all the plans to cast aside those who don’t belong, that we stand with the outsiders and with Jesus in a new kind of community. Many of you know the Edwin Markham poem,

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.