

Why Do You Strike Me?
John 18:12-27
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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What would you do? What would you have done? It's a question that echoes out of this text and has reverberated across our screens for the last week. First we found out the sheriff's deputy assigned to the high school in Parkland, Florida stayed outside during the rampage. Then we found out there were three other deputies on the campus or in the area who also stayed outside.

Powers that be were quick to point the blame at them — perhaps because we like scapegoats and perhaps to deflect from the astonishing impact the actions of the young survivors of the attack have been having on public opinion and the debate over semi-automatic weapons.

They should have gone in; they are trained; it's their job. Who might have been saved if they had? This is a tantalizing question we want to ask of these who, out of fear or caution, appear to have abandoned those they were supposed to be protecting.

Peter knows a little bit about that today, doesn't he? In chronological time, it's the night of Jesus' arrest, the night of the Passover meal that Jesus converted into something completely different that they will celebrate in a few minutes. It's also the night that Jesus tells Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crows to mark the coming of the next dawn.

Peter, and likely the other disciples, too, think Jesus can't be right. Peter has been the one most ardently taking the lead, preaching the gospel, representing the best of this new Way of Christ. How could he deny Jesus? Like others who have boasted of their bravery in the hypothetical, Peter is certain Jesus is wrong, until the cock crows. And then he realizes that, indeed, he has denied being a follower of Jesus three separate times in one night.. But he was preserving himself for the work that lay ahead, right? I mean, a little permissible mendacity that serves the greater good. Nothing wrong with that, right?

The Peter scenes are artfully combined with Jesus' first hearing — an interview not with the current high priest, Caiaphas, but with the former high priest, Annas. And did you notice who brought Jesus to Annas? The soldiers and the Jewish police, the Roman soldiers and the local constabulary who act under the authority of the high priest. The high priest may be a religious figure, but he's actually appointed by the Roman authorities. And so Jesus' arrest and meeting with Annas are our introduction to the lethal combination of fearful political leaders who can wrap themselves up in God's authority.

Did you notice that it is the local official who slaps Jesus when his behavior is deemed insufficiently respectful of political and religious authority? Jesus certainly does! "Why do you strike me," he asks. "There is no mystery to what I am saying. Ask anyone. I've been open. I've said it from the start."

Why do they strike him? Why does the power of the state, the power of the church need to strike at one who is speaking their own truth and asking others to consider whether it is their truth as well?

The parents of some of those youth from Parkland have been asking that question. Many of them, entire families, have had to leave social media. A few had to have police posted in front of their homes. They have been slandered seven ways from Sunday. They have been called un-American, and worse. Many of these children, who were just inches from death a little over two weeks ago, have received death threats for standing up, for speaking out — not to mention two weeks of almost relentless character assassination of 16-, 17-, and 18-year-olds who had the nerve to suggest that perhaps they are a new kind of expert on the cost of gun violence in America that we need to listen to.

Power plus fear is a dangerous thing. And the rest of Jesus' week in Jerusalem will prove it. But perceived powerlessness and fear — how much worse can that be?

Back to Peter — there he is. Jesus has been arrested. His love for his teacher keeps him near but his fear won't let him expose himself — to what? Embarrassment? Violence? Arrest? He doesn't know. And so, in a section of John where we witness Jesus saying over and over again, "I Am." we hear Peter say, "I am not."

And we can relate, can't we? Haven't there been times when each of us gave in to fear, not fully claiming who we were meant to be, who God was calling us to be, whether we denied it to others or to ourselves? Haven't we all sought safety at the cost of our bravely being our truest selves?

It's kind of odd that this is all we get today — Peter's denial and a slap on Jesus' face with his defiant, but not angry response. Peter lies like a rug and Jesus tells it like it is. Peter is safe. Jesus begins to experience the violence that will ultimately take his life. The test seems to suggest that the options are to give in to fear or be brave and bold, and get ready to have someone strike you — not the greatest of options if you ask me.

But then, no one said being a follower of Jesus was going to be easy. The message of grace and forgiveness — the message that we need not fear the powers that be because the ultimate power rests with a loving God — is a dangerous message. It's dangerous to those who maintain their power by using fear and intimidation. What happens if people stop believing that Rome must be appeased at all costs or the answer is death? What happens if people stop believing that the religious leaders of the day speak for God and must be obeyed at the risk of eternal separation from God? What happens if people stop thinking that their own deaths are the greatest possible tragedy that could befall humanity? What happens if Peter is freed from the fear that captivates him on this night of Jesus' arrest?

Here's the thing. Here's the good news in this sad and troubling part of the Holy Week story. We know the answers to the last two questions. The one who is stricken today will be hung on a cross 36 hours later. He will die at the hands of the powers that be who believe they are putting an end to a minor threat, when what they are doing is instead starting in motion the greatest moral and theological force the world has ever known. Jesus' death will not have the final say but Christ's love and grace will.

And Peter, who denies being a follower of Jesus three times, hears the cock crow and is called back to himself — to confront the reality of who he is. But he will not again surrender his post as a follower of Jesus. And in the days following Easter, in one of the brief encounters with the risen Christ, he will be asked by Jesus three times: “Peter, do you love me?” And three times he will have the chance to say, “Yes.” Three times he will reclaim who he is and who he is called to be.

Friends, there is much in the world today that seems designed to cause us to deny who we are, deny who we are called to be, perhaps even to deny that we are followers of this Jesus. Other Christians say things we find hateful or inconsistent with Jesus’ teachings and we want to say, “I’m not one of those.” Standing up for the powerless and the oppressed in our culture today often means standing up to people who look a lot like you and me on behalf of folks who don’t. And we aren’t comfortable with that.

Putting our lives on the line for what is right, either individually or as a church, seems to be too great a cost. We have families to take care of. We have ministries to support. Doing the dangerous thing, the thing that makes us afraid, the thing that has no guarantee of success, might expose us to ridicule or opposition. There are so many reasons to not be who we are called to be, to not step out. But Peter and Jesus today issue the invitation, not with a promise that we will emerge unscathed, but with the promise that we will not be alone and that whatever opposition we might face — if our actions are undertaken in love and respect and hope — when the dust settles, good will have come of it, for there is no greater love than to lay down one’s fears, one’s life for one’s friends.

This year we will likely spend a fair amount of time thinking about another act of violence. Ten years ago this coming November we saw the terrible terrorist attack on many western sites in Mumbai, India. Over 150 people died in the two-day series of attacks and the siege on the Taj Mahal Hotel in that city. Over 30 people died in the attack on that hotel which is popular with westerners. But when you look at the list of victims, you notice quickly that more than one-third of the victims were low level staff of the hotel or their families — people you might expect to flee in the face of violence.

At least three films will be released this year about the attacks and the most high profile one will star Indian English actor Dev Patel, who plays one of the hotel staff. You see, the reports that came from that disaster are now being studied all over the world, in business suites and in police seminars. Why did the staff stay? Why did they lay their lives down to protect tourists and business people they didn’t know? Why did hotel operators who were among the first evacuated sneak back into the hotel during the siege to contact and direct hotel guests how to escape? Why did low-paid food service staff create a human shield to active gunfire so that restaurant customers could scamper down a stairwell and escape?

The reason? It was revealed that this hotel did not follow the trend in India to hire the best students from the local schools. No, they recruited for personality types. They specifically recruited people who demonstrated high levels of empathy and compassion, love and care for the other. It was the defining characteristic they were seeking in employees and it turned out that those folks were the ones most willing to step into the fire, to protect others, to put themselves at risk for those the attackers were truly targeting.

What would we do? How can we know until we are faced with those choices? Will we get it right every time? No. So thank God that in Peter we see the power of grace to give us second chances. Will we be unscathed by our encounters with the oppressive powers of the world? Maybe, perhaps, probably not. But with God — in Christ, in those young people demanding we change, and in those brave women and men of the Taj hotel — we see that our fears need not control us, for in the end might does not make right and death does not have the final say.

May that give us strength and courage and hope to be who we are called to be, meant to be, loved to be.

Amen.