

Jesus at Prayer: Intercession
Luke 22:31-34
March 22, 2009

For the last three weeks we have observed Jesus at prayer early in his ministry – when he blessed bread, broke it and gave it to hungry people, when his popularity began to rise with the temptations that fame and power can bring, and when he decided which of his followers, his disciples, would become closest to him, to be called apostles, bearers of both memory and of hope when he was gone.

Now in the next three weeks, we will see Jesus at the conclusion of his ministry, the last prayers he offers as his life and work come to an end. Within the last twenty-four hours of his life, Jesus prays several times. Gathered with his disciples in an upper room, he takes bread, blesses God, breaks the bread, and gives it to his disciples, just as he had done earlier when he fed 5,000 people with a few loaves and a couple of fish, and we remember that last meal every time we gather around our communion table..

After the meal was over, only in Luke's gospel, are we told that Jesus has an unusual conversation with Peter. Jesus tells Peter that "Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." The name Satan hasn't been used in Luke's gospel since Jesus' baptism and his trials in the desert, when Satan departed to wait for an opportune time to present temptation once again. And now, here it is – temptation not just for Jesus, but for the disciples as well. Satan had already won over Judas, Luke says, and Judas has sold Jesus out to the authorities and will identify him later that evening to soldiers who will arrest him. It is the opening Satan has waited patiently for, the opportunity to test the steadfastness and loyalty of all of the disciples, and Judas failed the test. And now, Jesus sees that in the tumultuous and dangerous hours to come, the other disciples also will be tempted to fall away. They will be sifted, Jesus says, calling up an image from daily life in which flour was poured onto a screen or mesh, which was then shaken vigorously. The fine flour sifted through, while the impurities were trapped and exposed on the mesh. Peter will be shaken by the events that are about to unfold, and the stakes are high. And so Jesus does the only thing he can do; he prays for Peter. Where Satan's weapon of choice will be fear; Jesus' choice is prayer.

He doesn't pray that Peter escape the sifting – the time of trial, only that when it is over, he will return to the others to strengthen them. Peter, of course, doesn't think he needs prayer, because he doesn't think he can fail. With overconfidence born of both ignorance and inexperience he asserts, "Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you and to death." And to this empty promise, Jesus responds, "The cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

And of course, Jesus was right. Peter does deny Jesus – not once, not twice, but three times, just as Jesus said. To a servant girl in the courtyard outside the house of the high priest, who thinks she recognizes him as a follower of Jesus, he says, "Woman, I don't know him." And later, someone else also identifies him as "one of them." And Peter replies "Man, I am not!" And then an hour or so later, another person recognizes Peter as a Galilean, and Peter vehemently denies any relationship to Jesus, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And then in the distance, while the words are yet on his lips, a cock crows. And Peter goes out and weeps bitter tears.

But as bad as all that was, that's not what we remember Peter for. We don't know his name today because of his failures, but because of his triumphs – because he repented, he came back, and he strengthened the other disciples. His name now today is connected with everything positive in the church. Churches all over the world are named after him, including the great St. Peter's Cathedral in Vatican City, where his body is interred beneath its foundations. Children are named after him; cities are named after him. He came back, he encouraged the others, he received the holy spirit at Pentecost and he went forth from that time on never to deny his Lord again, but to preach whenever and wherever as best he could, the good news of Jesus Christ, finally being martyred for his faith in Rome.

I worry about folks like Peter who think they know it all; who are overly confident in their own abilities, who think it just isn't possible for them to fail or make a mistake because they've got everything all figured out and whatever life throws at them, they're ready for it; they can handle it. They don't need prayer; some say they don't need God; they don't need help of any kind because they're in control. And then inevitably, as is always the case, that day will come when life throws them a curve ball they weren't expecting and they can't control. Whether it's a job loss or a death or an illness, a child in trouble – something not wanted, not anticipated, that turns their lives upside down. It is interesting to watch what happens then. Some people will curse the God they say they don't believe in and others will find out that God has been waiting there patiently for them all along.

I know that because I was one of those people. In my twenties and early thirties I had a plan, I was smart, I was succeeding; I had everything under control. I didn't have time for church or prayer or anything so old fashioned and outmoded as that. If anyone had said they were praying for me, like Peter, I would have said "That's nice, but not necessary." And then a variety of life experiences knocked what I had thought were stable props out from under me. But through the grace of God, as the hymn proclaims, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." And like Peter, I turned around and went back and started all over to build a new foundation.

Judas couldn't do that. He became the judge and jury over his own life, and he sentenced himself to death, when all he had to do was turn around and go back. I think Jesus prayed for him too. But prayer isn't magic; and Judas had to make some choices of his own, just as Peter did.

We remember Peter so positively not because he never failed, but because he repented and began again. His life gives us all hope for those times when we feel inadequate, when we feel overwhelmed, defeated, lost. I suppose one of the reasons Peter is so well liked as a disciple is that he is so human, so like us who fail despite our best intentions. And who show our faith by repenting and seeking forgiveness and beginning all over again.

A key question of faith is "What do we do with our failures?" Do we let them stand as the final verdict on us? Do we think there's no hope for us because we've made a mistake? Or do we turn back from them and use them to strengthen our resolve to help others who face trials because we know exactly what that's like? Peter is the model disciple not because he never failed, but because he tried again.

In Romans Paul says "It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us." And the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." And in our United Methodist liturgy, we give thanks

“for Jesus who knew our griefs, who died our death and rose for our sake, and who lives and prays for us.”

Think about that – Jesus prays for us. We pray for one another and that intercession brings much comfort and peace. It means a lot to me, and I know it does to you, when someone says “I’m praying for you.” Suddenly we’re not alone any more; suddenly someone knows our griefs and bears that burden with us. But just as we pray for one another, so Christ prays for us as well, just as he prayed for Peter so long ago. Not that we will escape from the sifting of life, because Jesus isn’t an escapist, but that we will find our way through the turmoil, will turn around, and return to strengthen others.

Peter didn’t think he needed prayer. “I’m ready,” he said. “You’re not ready,” Jesus answered. “I’ll pray for you.” Jesus prayed for his disciples and he prays for us. There’s no feeling in the world like knowing someone is praying for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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