

## **“Betrayal, Denial and Thanksgiving”**

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 11/24/19

Text: Mark 14:12-31, at FBC of Newport, NH

*//27 “You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” [Zechariah 13:7] 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”*

*29 Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”*

*30 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”*

*31 But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.//*

—Mark 14:27-31

I wonder if the disciples approached this Passover meal the way we approach Thanksgiving. It’s supposed to be a wonderful time with family and loved ones, good food and a relaxing day watching football. Okay, so the football thing might not have been an expectation of Passover in Jesus’ day. But the atmosphere could well have been similar.

And yet, this meal was punctuated by trouble and tragedy. Danger surrounded this meal, which is why Jesus was careful about how the arrangements were made for the room and for the disciples to go there. Surely he didn’t want Judas to know too much beforehand. That way the supper couldn’t be the place of his arrest. (Gethsemane, however, was a regular place for Jesus to go in his habit of prayer.)

And at the meal itself there was that announcement of a traitor who would turn Jesus over to those seeking to kill him. You hear this at most every communion reading of scripture as we all approach the table of the Last Supper. “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread...” (1 Corinthians 11:23)

It is noteworthy that Jesus didn't expose Judas to everyone at the supper table. He could have. But that would have sealed the man's fate more than it already was. Instead he let Judas know that *he* knew what he was up to. And then he left Judas free to determine his own fate and his unwitting part to send Christ to the cross.

At the same time, Jesus used that opportunity to have the rest of the apostles examine themselves in the general light of one of them being a traitor. We're not bad guys and good guys. We're bad guys and bad-guys-saved-by-grace. Everyone at the meal was faced with examining themselves for their own potential of being the traitor. Not the kind of thing you picture at a typical feast such as Thanksgiving or even Passover.

And then after the meal, when the game should be only football, there is the real life drama to which they are walking as they set out for prayer at the garden of Gethsemane. On the way Jesus tells his most faithful disciples that they are all going to abandon him. It is prophesied in scripture. They will scatter like sheep whose shepherd has been struck down.

Peter, in typical Peter fashion, refuses to accept this terrible news—regardless of the fact that it's come from the scriptures and from Jesus himself. He insists he will not flee.

So Jesus gets very specific with Peter. Amazingly specific. Miraculously specific. He tell him that before the night is over, Peter will three times deny he even knows Jesus.

But Peter doubles down. He says even if he has to die with Jesus, he will not disown his Lord and friend of friends. And all the others join in agreement with Peter on this.

What a meal! What a time together and time following. How could this be any kind of remembering and giving thanks? Passover or Thanksgiving, this is surely not the way anyone but Jesus expected things to go.

So then, we should ask ourselves about this too. Even though we weren't there. And even though our Thanksgiving dinner will probably be less eventful as was this meal with Jesus and his disciples, we should still examine ourselves and the situation as if we were there. Because, as Christian believers, we are invited to that table and that remembrance. Regularly. And I have three points of Thanksgiving focus to guide us, particularly in light of Peter's encounter here in today's passage.

### **1. Be thankful Jesus knows the worst about us.**

What a terrible thing if Jesus was just another fallible, fallen human being trying to follow a naïve plan to save the world. What a terrible thing if both Peter and Jesus had overestimated the character of this top shepherd and now was about to have it all come crashing down. But if Jesus knew anything, it was the heart of the men and women he encountered. Nothing was going to shock him into a deeper understanding of human depravity and weakness because he already knew it in each and every one of us.

This knowledge of God is the subject of Psalm 139 and it nearly overwhelms David to contemplate.

*1 You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.*

*2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

*3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*

*4 Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.*

—Psalm 139:1-4

And David appeals to this knowledge of God to be of benefit to him by having God search him over and see if there are any hidden sins in his life.

*23 Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

What an insightful prayer!

This is exactly what Jesus is doing for Peter, though he doesn't appreciate it in the least. Think of the amazing knowledge Jesus has of Peter in order to predict his upcoming threefold denial! And thank God Jesus has this knowledge about us as well.

## **2. Be thankful Jesus is willing to warn us about our worst.**

If you're a believer then you have at least heard about your worst in general terms. We believe we are sinners in need of Jesus as Savior. We believe the cross reveals not only the depth of God's love and grace for sinners, but it also reveals the depth of our sin for which we need the death of Christ.

But generality and specific reality are not the same thing. The specific can be more challenging to face. And Jesus tends to be specific. He isn't content with platitudes and generality. He loves to meet with people one on one and he loves to get down to what specifically matters. The woman at the well and her numerous husbands; Nicodemus and his need to be born again; the woman with the bleeding and her desire to stay anonymous as she touches Jesus; Peter and his combination of a strong spirit and need to recognize his weakness in the flesh.

Think of that amazing knowledge of God focused through Jesus Christ for each and every one who will enter into a saving relationship with him.

Now Jesus wasn't revealing what he knew about Peter in order to show off to him. He was doing it because he loved Peter and was not going to let him plunge ahead to a near self-destruction when he had to see himself for who he was in his own strength—without also seeing the strength of Jesus right there with him, knowing him, all the way.

And this is the same Lord and Savior who died for you and me. Be thankful that he died knowing full well how pitiful we are without him and how desperately we need him. And be thankful Jesus doesn't let us go through life without his revealing to us what we need to hear, even if it's our worst.

### **3. Be thankful Jesus has plans to see us through our worst.**

This must have just gone over Peter's head. Really bad news will do this to average good news, as is so wonderfully captured by the old joke line of: "Other than that Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?" It would have to be some great play in order to counteract the bad news which interrupted it and the lives of everyone attending, as well as the lives of everyone in the country.

Yet Jesus' word to Peter actually *was* great enough. It just wasn't clear enough to him yet. Jesus spoke of his resurrection, return and regathering with his scattered disciples—the undoing of all that was tragic at the betrayal, arrest, denial and trial even before the cross. But Peter couldn't hear what Jesus was saying ... yet. He would, eventually. Jesus would make sure of it.

We do not have to have omniscient powers of knowledge in order to know that if our following of Jesus ever gets us into a situation like Peter's, then following Jesus is going to get us out of that situation. Because it did for Peter. And it will for us. Thankfully Jesus had plans to meet Peter and the others in Galilee. After he was betrayed, after he was denied, after he was crucified, he planned on being raised up and rejoined with all his followers in Galilee and beyond.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the kind of Good News that can overcome the worst news. Be thankful he already knows the worst about us. Be thankful that any spotlight he puts on our personal worst is for our good. And be thankful Jesus plans to follow through to that good, meeting up with us some day, at a great dinner—face to face—bringing even more thanksgiving to our lips.