



“Betrayal, Denial, Abandonment: Reflecting on Our Relationship with Christ”

Text: Mark 14: 32-48, 66-72

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Isn't Palm Sunday lovely? The bright green palms that we wave as we enter the Sanctuary. The robust music calling us to worship. Remembering Christ's return to Jerusalem as he is whole-heartedly embraced by his followers with shouts of Hosanna.

Our reading this morning from Mark is not the traditional story that we think about when we think of Palm Sunday. There is no reading here of happy people, welcoming Jesus with Love. After the last five Sundays of me preaching on our need to reflect, repent, seek forgiveness, and humble ourselves before God, I'm sure you were all eagerly awaiting a happy sermon. While happy sermons are always nice, and we do worship a God of Joy and Love, we are not quite there yet. For while Palm Sunday reminds us of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it is also an entry into a week of difficulty and torment that will lead to his crucifixion. A week that will include the betrayal by one disciple, disappointment in other disciples as they fall asleep when he needs them most, and finally to denial - not once, but three times by one of his most trusted disciples. Sounds heavy, doesn't it?

But by thinking about Christ's passion, by keeping his passion at the forefront of our minds, we stay reminded of his limitless love for all, for you and for me, and especially for those who are marginalized, the stranger, the rejected in society. These themes of abandonment, denial, and the transformative power of Christ's suffering, remind us most of the call to remember Christ's love and embrace liberation and freedom that comes through this sacrifice of Christ. And isn't that a happy thought?!

I'd like us this morning to look at each of these themes, betrayal, denial, and abandonment, so that we can learn from those early disciples. First, Betrayal. We know that it was Judas who betrayed Jesus, but we are never told why. What we do know about him is that he, like the other disciples, gave three years of his life to follow Jesus. He left behind family, whatever job he'd had, left everything to follow this man who, in the beginning, had no following. What led Judas and the others to give up everything to follow Jesus? He, just like the other disciples saw something in Jesus that led him to leave behind it all and to follow Jesus.

Judas betrayed Jesus. We're not told by any of the gospel writers why he did so, but let us look at what we do know. We know that no one in that tight group of twelve suspected that he would be the one to betray Jesus. We know that at the last supper, when Jesus said that one of them would betray them, all the disciples asked if it would be themselves. If Judas had ever shown signs of rebelliousness or traitorous behavior, the gospel writers would have mentioned it along the way, but they didn't. But somehow, through those three years of listening to Jesus' teachings, he hadn't truly understood the meaning of Jesus' words, despite those years with Jesus. Perhaps he had believed the Messiah talk of kingdom and power, but thought it would be an earthly kingdom he was going to put together and wanted to be near the seat of power. But when that wasn't happening, maybe he thought getting some money for his three year sacrifice would make it somewhat worthwhile.

What he probably didn't anticipate was that Jesus would be put to death. Religious disputes wouldn't have resulted in a death penalty. He probably was shocked to learn about the religious leaders turned him over to the Roman authorities and all that happened next. Well, we know what happens to the rest of the story of Judas. But how does his story relate to us today?

We need to consider carefully our motivations. Are our motivations tainted in some way? Judas' motivations were tainted, whether it was from sifting money off the top of what people gave to them, which might have been happening or whether it was the power he wanted, it didn't happen - and he betrayed Jesus. We need to ask ourselves what our motivation is when faced with situations we want to see happen. Do we have selfish motivations that are hiding within us that we need to root out?

And we need to consider what will happen in the end, if we make that choice in that decision - whether it will lead to something good for God, or is it only ourselves we are thinking about?

Eugene Peterson wrote in his book, *Letters to a Young Pastor*, that everything Satan offered Jesus in the wilderness looked good, but conflicted with Jesus' goals. Similarly, what Satan offered Judas looked good to him, but the end showed it was terrible. As we walk with God, we need to seek God's help to have the long view.

Second, denial. Peter denied Jesus three times, even though he told Jesus that he would never deny him. When it came down to it, his fear took over and he denied Jesus, not just once but three times! We may think that we never deny Jesus, but don't we at times? Peter denied Jesus when he found himself in a difficult situation and became afraid. He worried about his own safety and in so doing demonstrated that he really didn't trust Jesus with his life and with his future. He wanted the easy way. The comfortable way. He didn't want to risk what would happen to him if he acknowledged Jesus.

We often do the same, don't we? Fail to acknowledge Jesus when we are in difficult or painful situations? We give in to our fear or anger, our resentments, our grudges, our grief, and let them take over our lives rather than acknowledging the Christ who saved us. Instead of standing firm in faith that God can turn these feelings around, that God can make a good future for us despite the problems that pop up, we live in that anger or fear. This denial represents our inability to fully accept and believe in Jesus for who he is and what he does for us each and every day. We deny Jesus often in our lack of deep faith and trust in the miracle of Jesus' life on earth and in the resurrection into new life.

I always had my hospice patients remember those moments when they knew without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was there with them and had gotten them through some difficult situation. In that recalling, they found strength to get through the health challenge of that day and in facing their own impending death. Our denial is our inability to accept fully and believe in Jesus for who he is. When we are able to see those moments of God's faithfulness to us we draw strength and should always draw on that strength when troubles come our way. Don't deny Jesus, but acknowledge him when life gets difficult.

Finally, abandonment. The disciples first slept and then fled when Jesus needed them most. Do we do that? Sleep when Jesus calls us to be awake and watch? Flee when we don't want to deal with the messiness of life? How do we see ways we abandon Jesus in modern day? For me that brings me back to Matthew 25. We abandon Jesus when we ignore the stranger, when we do nothing to help the poor and marginalized, when we don't try to welcome and bring into the fold those rejected in society. Jesus said that in as much we do for these people we do it unto him, but too often we abandon them to struggle - struggle to eat, struggle to get adequate housing, struggle to get healthcare. Instead they struggle, often dying young because of these difficult lives they are forced to lead and we abandon Jesus by not doing more to change the oppressive system that they live under.

There is a story that Alexander Schmemmann told. He was a Greek Orthodox priest. He shared that when he was young and in love, he got on a train in Paris with his girlfriend of the time. They were laughing and enjoying themselves when a very large, old, and very ugly woman boarded the train. In his native tongue of Russian, he and his girlfriend laughed at the ugliness of the woman. When she got up to leave the train, she said to them in perfect Russian, "I didn't always look this way." That encounter brought a shock of revelation to him, as he saw the old woman as an angel, a reminder to him to see beyond appearances and embrace the divine presence in others.

We abandon Jesus when we flee from the poor and destitute. Why else would we make sure that the poor live near industrial areas instead of being integrated in housing with the average person? We don't want to see. We deny the extent of the problems these people live with. We close our eyes to their suffering; and in so doing we deny and we abandon Christ. We need to see the divine in each person, so that we can see the angels that are all around us and accept the gifts that come through that.

As we continue to reflect on the passion of Jesus during this final week of Lent, let us stay conscious of the ways that we betray, deny, and abandon the One whom we say we worship and follow. Let us remember that we follow Jesus not for what he can do for us, but for who he is. Let us remember we worship the living God, the resurrected Christ, through whom we live and have our being. Amen.

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