

Riverside United Church
March 23, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 22: 47-62

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'

Peter Denies Jesus

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"The Last Hours - #3 - The Limits of Disciples"

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
 ... and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?"

I wonder how often the disciples thought back to their call stories - to when Jesus invited them to follow. I wonder if those 12 guys - and let's quickly remember their name - Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon, and Judas (I did look that up) - I wonder if those 12 guys talked about the day Jesus called them and about why they responded, what they gave up? I wonder when it was they realized that they were in for more than they imagined ... I wonder if they ever regretted saying yes. For the disciples we can imagine that it has been a intriguing journey over these three years of transforming and letting the love and life of Jesus grow within them.

And as we read the gospel accounts, we may note that the learning curve of the disciples is not a straight line of growth and comprehension, but rather one with bumps and curves, moments of clarity and moments of confusion. I often find myself in the story through the character of these disciples.

While 12 disciples are called, we don't hear much about many of them. James, John and Peter seem to be the inner cabinet through most of the gospel narrative. In the last hours of Jesus' life, it's Judas and Peter that are remembered. After the meal in the Upper Room, the rest fade into the background and we can only imagine the mixture of emotions and reactions that they bore.

Today we are continuing our look at the last hours of Jesus' life, which is referred to as the Passion Narrative. Jesus is still at the Mount of Olives, his garden of anguish experience, and is talking with the disciples when Judas arrives a crowd that includes the chief priests, the officers of the temple police and the elders to arrest him. For this series, I kind of skipped the verses when Judas makes the arrangements to show these officials where Jesus will be, so that he can be called to account for what is seen as blasphemy to the Jewish tradition.

The scene we do read today is the back end of that deal. Those officials who have been working to destroy Jesus since he entered Jerusalem now have their chance under the cover of darkness. As Jesus says, "This is your hour, the power of darkness."

The motive of Judas has been debated. The traditional sense is that it's the power of greed took hold and so he sold out for coins of silver. There would be voices that would argue that perhaps he did this to speed along or bring about the conflict of power between the Roman oppression and movement for freedom led by Jesus. But, Jesus was not the military Messiah they were hoping for. Others would say that Judas was playing a role to

bring about the prescribed, pre-destined death of Jesus so that salvation would come to the world on the cross.

Maybe Judas reached the limit of this discipleship path and a mixture of motives, hopes and fears led him to do what he did. Betrayal usually involves a mixture of dynamics, needs and consequences.

The other disciple in focus in our reflection today is Peter. And again we are joining the story part way through as Jesus has already told Peter that denial would be happening and Peter was convinced that it wouldn't. But, courage and fear are going to define this night for Peter as it has for much of the path of his discipleship. So, when the rooster crows and Peter realizes that he has denied Jesus three times, he hangs his head in shame. And the gospel of Luke is the only one that mentions that Jesus looks at him at this moment, which may mean that the tears of Jesus were more bitter than he could have imagined.

“Will you come and follow me ... and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?”

The other day, someone was leaving a gathering in Room 4 and I was kind of at the office door and she looked through to my office and saw on the top shelf a rooster. And she said, “oh do you love roosters too?” And I said it's more of a prop, a symbol for Good Friday services. I am not sure that she knew the reference.

Peter knew the limits of discipleship and the rooster remains a symbol of that story, of that pain, of that reality.

These last hour stories invite us to imagine ourselves in the story and to translate those dynamics and realities into the lives we are living. Because we know it's difficult to respond to Jesus' invitation:

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
 Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
 Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
 will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

In reflecting on this story, my thinking was drawn a little bit to the religious leaders of the day that were threatened by what Jesus was saying and teaching. They were seeking to be faithful to the tradition that gave meaning to their reality. And yet, the limits of their faithfulness were also revealed.

Jesus says to them, “This is your hour, the power of darkness.” And I resist using the

metaphor of darkness for evil, but the power of evil is seen throughout these last hours. We are conditioned to think of evil as some heinous crimes and things we would never do. We think of it as the extremes of human behaviour. But, the disguises of evil are throughout the story, throughout our lives and that truth reveals the limits of disciples, the limits of our humanity.

Evil is that which opposes goodness, life, fulfillment, love - that which is opposite to holiness and there is a good versus evil dimension to this Passion Narrative. But, that struggle is not always so clearly outlined or defined.

I recently heard someone say as we were talking about our culture and our context, that they are looking for leadership that inspires, rather than incites. And we know that our culture has somehow said that inciting distrust, and anger, and fear is the way to power and opportunity. Am I the only one who feels that I have to brace myself for the election campaign that begins today? Where is the inspiration in our world?

Jesus was trying to live the way of inspiration. There were times when he was angry, but that emphasized the way of love rather than distracted from it.

One of the challenges for many of us is that we have lived through a time when the culture did much of the formation of what it meant to be Christian and it was assumed that everyone had a connection to a church. We have moved beyond that and so we have the work of learning about being a disciple and it being more of a counter-cultural choice.

The stories from the last hours of Jesus' life may not be the best promotional strategy for encouraging followers of Jesus. It may be a hard sell to shed light on some of those hardest moments of discipleship.

But, that really is the challenge about living into the call of following Jesus in a world that prefers the easy, the shallow, the non-commitment, the non-conflict, the apathy picture of life that our society often portrays and promotes. The problem with that portrayal is that reality shows that life is not easy, that it's not fair, that it's not shallow. Life involves some pretty difficult choices and living with some unjust realities.

The path of apathy and despair leaves the institutions and dominant powers of the society and world in place and we can see how they can be manipulated into downward spirals of oppression and evil.

Jesus offered the invitation to follow so that through the challenging choices and realities, there would be some depth of wisdom and courage to live with compassion and hope.

The last hours of his life are challenging to get through, but are a reminder that there are those who are living those realities in various forms and so we're invited to ponder what it means to seek a deeper sense of truth and courage.

And as we hear these stories, we know that these are stories of the last hours of Jesus' physical life, but death did not end his life and influence, for we are still living the resurrection hours of the presence and hope of the Risen Christ.

As we seek to follow the way of Jesus, we know that there will be limits to our discipleship. There are times when we may betray what we know to be true. There are times when we will hear the rooster and know that we have not admitted or fulfilled - in words or in actions - what it means to live in the way of love and hope.

But we're not invited to path of perfection. We are invited to the path of love, hope and grace. And we know that in a time that incites division, fear, despair, we are called to know, to seek, and to share inspiration - even when that is hard to recognize. We are reminded that the Holy Energy of Love and Truth is seeking to pierce through the disguises of evil, and we can be the hands and feet, the ears and the voice of that Truth and Love.

Amen