

Sermon March 8, 2026 In Denial

I'd like to start by acknowledging that it's International Women's Day, and I am standing here about to deliver a sermon, an act that would not have been possible all that long ago. Today we are also marking PIE Day to celebrate our queer and trans siblings in Christ. That also would not have been possible all that long ago. And last week Emma reminded us that there is work to do to fully include people who are disabled. So let's both be grateful for where we are and continue to strive to be fully inclusive and make reparations for harms we have committed.

Today's reading is from John 18, and it's a pretty well known story where Peter denies Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Peter worked hard to believe in Jesus and be a good follower. He didn't desert Jesus earlier in the garden when most of the other disciples ran away in fear. And yet he ends up denying even knowing Jesus, first to a servant girl, then to someone warming themselves at the fire, and a third time to a servant of the high priest. Note that it's not officials who are questioning him, but ordinary people. Meanwhile it's the officials who are questioning Jesus about his activities. And indeed, the passage is set up to compare the two- the perfect Jesus who answers honestly and the human Peter who lies that he does not know Jesus.

When I was doing some reading and research into this passage and in particular Peter's denial, I found language of commendation:

"This is a sin that is the most heinous sin in the New Testament by a Christian. It is a sin that is done right to the face of Jesus Christ." Another commands us to: "compare Christ who is perfect with Peter who is flawed, cowardly, sinful."

Oh dear, that's pretty awful judgment. I'd like to question those harsh reactions and suggest another way to look at Peter's misdeeds.

The scripture in John has some very skilful story telling. It intersperses Jesus' honest, clear and open reactions to being questioned to Peter's falsehoods about whether he even knows Jesus. As someone who does a little writing myself, I'm struck by how powerful this makes the story. Instead of just telling it in a linear way with all of Peter's denials bunched together and Jesus's reactions in a piece, we are dared to contrast the two men- the perfect and the very very human. Jesus is struck for being honest, while Peter seeks personal comfort by standing by the fire and then lying.

And I honestly don't think that John means to completely condemn Peter for his wrong doing. I think he wants to amplify the right way to deal with those who question us about our beliefs and about things we know to be true.

But how does Peter go from being this sinner who denied Jesus, to Peter called the Rock, founder of the Christian church?

Peter told three falsehoods at a critical point in Jesus' journey to the cross, just when Jesus needed love and support from the people he had taught and led. Peter was also in all likelihood vulnerable, confused and afraid for his safety. Very human. It was a politically tense time and dangerous environment and Peter was accused of being a foreigner. Being viewed as 'the foreigner' is always a dangerous thing, as we know if we look at the news on any given day. And honestly, who amongst us might not do the same? We like to imagine that we'll be that person who stands up to the bully in a dangerous situation and tells them boldly that they're wrong and that we're not afraid to tell them so. When my parents told me about growing up under Nazi occupation in the Netherlands, I always imagined that I'd be that brave resistance patriot who smuggled hidden notes and communiques. Now I'm not so sure. Yes, I've been brave at times, but what if my life or my family's life was at stake?

I was born in the Netherlands to a Mennonite mother and Dutch reformed father, although I learned very recently that my father also had Mennonite roots.

Anyway, my parents met after the Second World War at a church youth group set up to help young people heal from the trauma of the war. Under Nazi occupation Christian leaders who spoke against the regime suffered harsh consequences. After the war was over, church leaders recognized that division and segregation

from other Christians was dangerously akin to the divisions Nazis had espoused. Those leaders decided to create ecumenical youth groups that focused on rebuilding community, and bridging divides between denominations. The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in Amsterdam in 1948. Its Youth Division was central to organizing international ecumenical workcamps.

Young people worked together to have camps for children, rebuild bombed out buildings, plant gardens and promote world peace through mutual respect and cooperation between all people for a common progress.

I wonder what compromises those young people had to make to reconcile their differences and their past? I wonder if any of them lied about what they had done during the war simply to get by? Should we dismiss them out of hand? My mother talked about having a boy in her class who was a Hitler youth and brought a gun to school. Why? To use it, or as a show of power and strength? I don't know, but I do know that challenging him in any way would have been met with repercussions. The teacher and the other students were too afraid to say anything. Is that cowardice or expedience? And what about after the war? What happened to him? Were his fellow classmates ever able to reconcile with these "traitors?" My mother recalls as the war had just ended, seeing Dutch women accused of consorting with the enemy publicly having their heads shaved as a visible mark of shame by gleeful neighbours. Mum told me that she and a group of her friends cheered to see it done. They were so glad to be liberated and had

such a longing for the evil doers and those who supported them to be humiliated and punished. My mother was 15 years old at the time and she'd lived under the occupation for five long years. I think church leaders were tremendously wise to realize these young people needed the space and time to heal and come together. They did that by giving them meaningful work to do, and doing it together with others.

How do we deal with people who have done wrong in our eyes?

Going further back to my mother's Mennonite ancestors, what did they have to do to fit in and escape persecution? Did they have to deny their faith and their beliefs? I don't know what they did to survive the persecution, but I've pondered that if everyone would have martyred themselves, we might not be sitting here today. Could it be that sometimes you need to hold fast and do what you have to do so you can survive to pass on the message when it's safer to do so. Surely there are times when it's brave to break the rules. Like when my teenaged mother smuggled food for her family in a hidden compartment in her baby sister's carriage. Or when the people in Minneapolis or Gaza or any number of places in the world stand up to unfair, arbitrary and punitive authority.

But let's get back to Peter and his denials. Peter had been trying to follow Jesus faithfully, and didn't run away and hide like most of the other disciples. But Peter always tried to figure things out on his own. He recoiled at the thought of Jesus

washing his feet; he felt that he needed to protect Jesus so he cut off the High Priest's servant's ear. And In today's story, it was Peter's fear that got the better of him, and he lied about his identity and involvement.

Peter's sin was not just that he lied, but that he was constantly trying to take matters into his own hands. He thought he needed to protect himself, so he denied knowing Jesus. It's the same sort of stuff over and over again with Peter. Jesus had questioned Peter's bravado ahead of time and warned him that he would deny him, but Peter refused to believe he'd be capable of such a thing. Who can imagine they'd ever deny their beloved teacher and friend?

Of course Peter wasn't the only disciple who betrayed Jesus- we can't overlook Judas who accepted money to turn Jesus in. Both of them sinned. But let's look at how their sins differed.

I think we have to see what happens next to get a few clues.

First, let's talk about Judas. He, like Peter, was wracked with guilt. It's indeed an awful feeling when you have done something terrible and you feel there's no way out. And perhaps being in despair and thinking that he had no other option, he took his own life. Judas didn't have the courage to face Jesus and admit his sin.

Compare this with Peter's story, told later on in John. We have the scene at the tomb where Peter and another disciple see the body but still don't believe that it's

Jesus. And then later Jesus presents himself to them and they respond with joy. But what then? The disciples go back to fishing, not sure, I imagine, what they're supposed to do now. Their leader was horribly killed.

My guess is that Peter was feeling awkward and guilty wondering if he'd see Jesus again, and if he did, how he'd approach Jesus who he'd wronged.

It's really hard to admit to yourself when you've wronged someone. It's even harder when you have to meet that person face to face and hear their reaction to you. But that's what Peter did. He and a couple of the other disciples are fishing in the Tiberian sea. Jesus appears on the shore, although they don't recognize him at first. Jesus instructs them to cast their net on the other side of their boat and they'll have plenty of fish. One of the disciples cries out "It's the Lord!" Peter, perhaps ashamed, perhaps to pull in the net, jumps into the water and then brings the netful of fish to shore. Jesus roasts the fish over a fire for the disciples. Again I'm struck by Jesus' humility in preparing food for the people who had run away and denied him. Then Jesus gets to it with Peter. "Do you love me more than these?" pointing to the others.

"Yes Lord, you know I love you."

Jesus responds with "Feed my lambs."

Then he asks Peter again, "Do you love me?"

“Yes Lord, you know I do.”

“Then take care of my sheep.”

And a third time, “Do you love me?”

“Lord, you know everything, you know I love you!”

Jesus responds “Feed my sheep.”

And then Jesus tells Peter to follow him. Note that Jesus has asked him the same question, once for every time that Peter denied him.

There it is, an amazing example of forgiveness and reconciliation. Peter has sinned, but he has been forgiven. (And I can't ignore the fact that Jesus prepared them a meal and then instructed Peter to feed his sheep. In other words, go out and feed others as I have fed you.) But the forgiveness was more than words.

Jesus clearly instructed Peter what he had to do going forward to prove he understood. So it is after you have wronged someone and after you have reconciled. You have an extra responsibility to make amends and prove that you have understood the sin. That becomes Peter's task.

We all sin, we all fall short, we all do wrong. That's human. What matters is what happens after that. Can we forgive those who have sinned against us? Can we forgive ourselves when we have sinned? Can we have the courage to face the

person or people we have sinned against? And what are we prepared to do to atone? Because that's where the real work starts.

- In what ways do we feel torn between solidarity and self-protection these days, between the boldness of publicly standing up for our values and the impulse to hide?
- How might we be experiencing the dissonance between risk and comfort?
- What rooster crows or wake up calls have we been hearing?
- How might God be calling us to walk in the way of Jesus, in our current context?

Pray that we have the courage to do the right thing and when we don't, be brave enough to seek forgiveness and make amends.

I'd like to end with a poem, a sonnet, called Saint Peter. It's by Malcolm Guite, an English poet, singer and Anglican priest.

Saint Peter

Impulsive master of misunderstanding

You comfort me with all your big mistakes;

Jumping the ship before you make the landing,

Placing the bet before you know the stakes.

I love the way you step out without knowing,

The way you sometimes speak before you think,

The way your broken faith is always growing,

The way he holds you even when you sink.

Born to a world that always tried to shame you,

Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,

I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,

Before you knew how to deserve that name.

And in the end your Saviour let you prove

That each denial is undone by love.

Amen

Scripture John 18:12–27 Anabaptist Community Bible

12 Then the company of soldiers, the commander and the guards from the Jewish leaders took Jesus into custody. They bound him 13 and led him first to Annas. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year. (14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it was better for one person to die for the people.)

15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Because this other disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard. 16 However, Peter stood outside near the gate. Then the other disciple (the one known to the high priest) came out and spoke to the woman stationed at the gate, and she brought Peter in. 17 The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?"

"I am not," he replied. 18 The servants and the guards had made a fire because it was cold. They were standing around it, warming themselves. Peter joined them there, standing by the fire and warming himself.

19 Meanwhile, the chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered, "I've spoken openly to the world. I've always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews gather. I've said nothing in private. 21 Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them. They know what I said."

22 After Jesus spoke, one of the guards standing there slapped Jesus in the face, "Is that how you would answer the high priest?" he asked? 23 Jesus replied "If I speak wrongly, testify about what is wrong. But if I speak correctly, why do you strike me?" 24 Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

25 Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing with the guards warming himself. They asked, "Aren't you one of the disciples?" Peter denied it saying "I am not." 26 A servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said to him, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" 27 Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed.