

Profiles in Courage

Menno Mennonite Church

March 8, 2026

Purpose: To explore the dissonance between the challenges of faith that swings between compassion and denial.

Message: Even as we find the conflict between our inclination to fear and the invitation to courage, we are reminded that it is this same human person who fails also becomes the foundation of the church.

Scripture: John 18:12-27 (I will read); Psalm 95:1-7a (Please Read)

Synopsis: We all recall the moments of our failing. There are moments that come frequently unbidden where we remember where we have not lived up to our best intent. We can identify with this moment of indecision and self-protection that wracked Peter in this time. We can admire the open honesty of Jesus as he answers the demands of him from those questioning him. We imagine the remonstrations Peter held for his feeling, but always recall that in the end Jesus comes and founds on him the church that emerges from these very ashes.

John 18:12-27

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, 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'm 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 was 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 his disciples?” Peter denied it, saying, “I’m 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.

There are some dreams that just stick with you. You know the ones—the kind that have you bolt awake with a pounding heart and likely sweaty palms. The anxious dreams that visit us all from time to time. They are so common that they can be broadly categorized: chasing, falling, and performance. The first two categories are obvious—the stuff that haunts our dreams with vivid images that scare us to know end as the thought have not done for eons with our ancestors. It is the fundamental existential dread. The third, though, is far more varied and nuanced; the stuff that creeps into our more deliberating mind then just whatever our fear-centered omegala happens to be contemplating. This is where the public speaking without your pants dreams live; stuff like that. These too are rather familiar and likely even more common as the bad dream categories because it involves all the stuff that involves embarrassment, shame, and capability (you know, the stuff that feeds the ego what it most wants). It is failure here that haunts us most. The times where the wheels come off the metaphorical cart and no matter how hard you try you cannot get them back on again. I can tell you as a person whose life is at least in part tied to a regular level of performance, there is still an element of fear that can wake me up at night. Both Emily and I sometimes recount “yeah, I had a preaching dream last night” and know precisely what we mean and know it is time for a bit of empathy for the other. Even for doing this for 20 years now there is always a little pinch of fear to go with standing up and speaking. I have come to understand in time the point isn’t always to get past the fear—that is only ever go away so far; the point is to not allow the fear to prevent you from jumping in all the same.

Where we to have John present this scene to us with cinematic vision, I imagine that this would be a time for one of those split screen effects. You know the kind—where you have two characters shown in parallel in together-but-separated circumstance when the director wants to show some contrast or the other likely with some dramatic yet urgent music in the background. The scene would be night, within the inner quarters of the corridors of power with shadows all around. We would have Jesus bound a dragged through the streets with Peter sticking to the shadows following along. Then we would have it; Peter on one side, Jesus on the other, same place, same time, but very different circumstances and very different responses. We cannot help but see the contrast between the two. John points this out for us sandwiching them together with Peter’s denial bracketing Jesus’ confident, conversational tone, asking for those who question him to show him the error of what has been. Peter is trying to maintain the secret of his identity,

hiding from what has been. In a matter of hours he goes from the ardent declarations of love and unequivocal desire to be associated with Jesus that he struck the first blow in the Jesus liberation movement by lopping of the ear of the servant (that comes right before this if you are keeping track). But when he learns that the means and methods of protection that he knows and understands- the playbook of power and protection are not the plan, he doesn't know what to do and is at a loss. He does not yet know that there are more than one way to fight the good fight. We have to wonder what possessed him to follow him in the first place. Was Peter envisioning some sort of heroic rescue mission with a couple good quips along the way? Peter attempts to follow Jesus to the mouth of danger but loses his nerve when it comes right down to it. Peter's vulnerability as he stood by the fire is unbearable.

Jesus in our split frame is clear and calm despite the circumstances. He presents himself to the questioning not as someone who has something to hide or be ashamed of—the very opposite in fact. He owns the truth that he has been presenting. In fact he questions the questioners wondering where the departure from propriety came that they now accuse him off. He is not cowed by the violence meted on him. He will not be governed by the system of how things are done; that is not his part. It needs to be said, I think, that he arrives at this conviction not out of dismissal of the reality of what was going on around him or what could happen to him. I don't think being the Son of God exempted him from the fear that is endemic to the human condition. I simply think that he was able to place his fears into the context of his purpose and his reality. John's passion is not just about the grand arching story of the passion in exquisite, painful, all too lucid detail. John tells this story as a means of telling the fullness of the story that actually matters: the mission of Jesus to be about what God was up to through him. Part of that is this discordant note of suffering and sacrifice. We want to retreat from it; we would just as soon hide all together and not think about it. Jesus understands this, but meets the suffering head on.

Back to Peter. All he can do is avoid the question and push back against the accusations. It was for him the only seeming path to safety. Jesus stands; Peter retreats and hides. It is hard not to imagine Peter years later waking to the cock crowing in his ears as he awoke from his own performance nightmare. How could it be otherwise even after the reconciliation that follows Jesus' return? My persistent belief that we are best to read Peter as not only as the historic disciple-in-chief but also the human in chief holds here too I think. We judge ourselves by our

deepest darkest moment, are often the last to forgive ourselves even when others have long since absolved us along the way. I think Peter's post-resurrection story is further evidence of this. When you have already encountered the worst of your failures and have that behind you, what then is holding you back from boldness going from there? I don't think we are given this scene just to illustrate the faithless nature of a disciple or disciples in general either. That's how we read it: see even Jesus knew that he was going to fail and predicted what was going to happen. Rather I think this is part of the ongoing illustration of the mission that Jesus on, a mission that would in time be handed to the one who followed but could not find his way out of the shadows to be known for what he knew and believed.

The struggle of this night is the struggle of the world, and is our struggle as well. We are all far more brave when we know that we ourselves have power available to us. It is way easier to stand strong when we are standing behind strength. Peter was fully armed with weapons and confidence before and now they have both been put beyond reach. We struggle with what it means to be vulnerable. It has been an ongoing theme of the church in both power and lack of power. There is an ongoing debate on how the church should conduct itself, and really there has been from the earliest of time. Constantine in his conversation marked his weapons with the sign of the cross at the battle of Milvian Bridge, convinced that he was to conquer in Christ's name. Through the centuries the temptation to use the power of coercion and the banner of Christ as a symbol of conquest has been ever present, as has been the debate of what that means to be the church. Is this the way to build the kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven?

But there is the other side of the coin too. We could secure ourselves in anonymity and otherness, blending in the best way we can. We can use the logic of Peter and hide and prevaricate in the hopes of being left well alone. It must be said that this has been the Anabaptist strategy more times than not. We are the quiet in the land not because we were trying to hide, no, but because we were pretty good at separating our world and affairs from the messy reality of the world around us. And that has long been complicated. If we stay quiet, if we do not confess that indeed we are with the Christ what then does THAT do with and for us. There are not easy answers. But the question remains relevant in every generation and at every time.

At the end of it all, though, I think we also need to note the totality of the Peter's story as well. This was Peter's nightmare scenario, and followed him as his lowest time, I don't doubt. But it is not Peter's nightmare that determines Peter's future. Instead it is Jesus' way coming to

him as he was for who he was that made the difference. We live in the shadow of our failures, convinced that they are what matters. But then we are called from those very shadows to come and follow and know Jesus yet again. We are invited to follow Jesus not from the shadows but in the full confidence and truth that is the fullness of the gospel. That invitation is not determined by our prior performance. It is Peter who denied that is the foundation of the church. It is human nature replete in its inclination to seek protection and shielding that carries the kingdom into the world even today. The good news is that we are always called, time and again, to come and follow the way of discipleship, even when we might have think we have failed that call some time before. God does not judge as we do. We judge ourselves at our worst. God judges us as we fully are, broken all the same, but able to build, follow, and find faith, even when we would rather just remain in the shadows. We are the stuff that the kingdom is bult upon, and invited always to come and follow.

The central contrast between Jesus' candor and Peter's denials is the systems of power. Peter remains gripped by the power of the world, of our world. Christ is committed to a different kind of power. It is the power of truth and integrity that will not participate in the performance of fear and coercion that would drive us into hiding. The preist's authority is fragile, propper up by the threat of violence and destruction. Jesus' authority is intrinsic and open. Jesus demonstrates here and the whole way to the cross and beyond that true courage is not a function of power, but commitment to remain governed by mission and truth, even when that leads to the cross.

May we each find our way to follow not from our nightmares of failure, but in the courage of faithful following that welcomes us to come and build even today. May we in following find courage and know Jesus' call to but follow where he leads.