

Lenten Midweek 4
The Denial and the Blood
1 Peter 1:13-25
Matthew 26:69-75

Have you ever violated your conscience? You have a conscience. It is a God-given gift. The Scripture says that the law is written on your heart (Romans 2:15). Those who had great influence on you when you were a youngster taught you right from wrong. As a Christian, your conscience has been refined by God's Word. When God calls you to be holy, He works in you what He desires. By Christ's blood you have been remade, refashioned, recreated. New life abides in you and that new life is holy. What God demands, God provides. But you are to behave in a way that is commensurate with what He has made you to be, commensurate with your new nature, the nature God gave you when you were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. What does your conscience allow you to do? Do you get tired of living a holy life? Are you like Billy Joel? Would you rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints? Is that what you think holy living is, crying with the saints?

Martin Luther said that to act against conscience is neither right nor safe. Do you agree with that? Content sinners; do you think that it is possible to violate your conscience to the point that your conscience no longer *feels* violated, that one is no longer conscious of sin, no longer bothered by engaging in sinful behavior? Is that a real risk for all of us? Do you take such things seriously? Would you say that living a Christian life takes effort? Thanks be to God – we are saved by grace. God's work alone in the person of His Son has redeemed us from sin and death. When we were dead in trespasses and sin, God made us alive in Christ; it is by grace we have been saved (Ephesians 2:5). Our salvation is a free gift. We did nothing to deserve the forgiveness lavished upon us through Christ's blood. We can't rectify the problems of sin and death. Christ intervenes on our behalf and delivers us because only He has the authority, the power to do so. He is merciful and His love endures forever. It is also true that believers can live impoverished lives spiritually.

Why do we avoid sin? Are we, the saints of Christ the King, merely a set of moralists? Is Christianity about being good or being aligned with Christ? **Why would we want to be aligned with Christ?** Pontius Pilate knew that he was crucifying an innocent man (Luke 23:4). And he handed Jesus over to be crucified anyway. Pilate washed his hands in a public gesture of self-proclaimed innocence: "I am innocent of this man's blood" (Matthew 27:24). He was not innocent. His conscience screamed at him and he caved to some other force. Peter denied even knowing Christ. Imagine the pit in his stomach as Peter distanced himself from love, distanced himself from truth, distanced himself from freedom. Peter thereby became a prisoner to his lie, prisoner to his fear, prisoner to his survival. Have you been prisoner to something to the point of violating your conscience? It is a wretched feeling. Peter, in the safety of the Upper Room, said this: "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (Matthew 26:33). I have no doubt that he believed that about himself. What happened?

There are two depictions of this event, Peter's denial, which I like. The first is from the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. In the movie, Jesus is being assaulted, beaten in the street by the Temple guard. It's chaotic and violent. Peter is in that tumult and a burly man grabs his clothing with both hands and accuses Peter in a threatening manner. Peter is being pushed around by the crowd and the potential for him to be swept up in the violence is real. Mean, unhinged people hurl their accusations. The atmosphere is stifling. The director makes it seem as though the world is closing in on Peter. In other words, the director gives Peter cover for denying Christ. The other depiction that I like is the painting on the cover of the bulletin. Comparatively, it is serene. A single finger is pointing toward Peter as an exceedingly mild accusation. Which depiction is accurate? Did Peter cave under extraordinary pressure or was the lightest touch enough to make Peter violate his conscience? What's it like when you violate your conscience?

Jesus knew that it was going to happen. Imagine your closest ally abandoning you to a pack of jackals. Imagine your closest ally abandoning you because they just wanted to save their precious, highly valued skin. "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (Matthew 26:34). It was adamant, this denial. Peter invoked a curse on himself and began to swear that he didn't know Jesus. That's how the Bible describes Peter's denial. What happened to him? I don't know. I do know that the world hasn't changed. I know that spirituality hasn't changed. I know that the human heart hasn't changed. Jesus said this to His disciples: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:20). Have you found your life? Have you discovered where your life is anchored? In this season of Lent, we are determined to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ because we have discovered that our lives are in Him. The world and its desires are passing away (1 John 2:17). Christ and His kingdom endure forever.

Have you found your life? It's in the blood; your life is in Christ's blood. He shed it for you that you may live. Living for yourself is not living. Living in violation of your conscience is the opposite of living, the opposite of freedom, the opposite of faith. Jesus' blood sets you free. The truth sets you free. Living in the Word of God is living. We fail. He knows it. And He gives Himself to us over and over and over again. How sweet it is to be forgiven. Peter knew that sweetness, that restoration, that bond of love which Christ brings to the fallen. Do you know that bond, that commitment which Christ has for you? That when you were miserable, with a pit in your stomach at having violated your conscience, and Jesus embraced you, picked you up, forgave you and made you whole. Have you grown from those episodes? Have you become wiser by those episodes, increased in gratitude toward God by way of those episodes, more merciful toward others?

Lent is discipline. Fighting against our sinful nature is no picnic. Resolve; effort; we apply ourselves to a spiritual struggle because we want to be aligned with Christ. He is glorious and holy and good. He is going to love us irrespective of how well we keep God's commands. The Lord Christ is a present Savior who never tires of teaching and forgiving and sharing His holiness with us. The Messianic King aligned Himself to us. Taking on our flesh, the Son of God set His face toward Jerusalem. Taking on our sin, the Son of Man set His face toward the cross. Taking on our death, the Word made flesh set His face toward our tomb, our grave. He aligned Himself to you when all others abandoned you. Your relationship with life is your

relationship with Christ the crucified; just you and Him. He treasures that relationship, that bond. His blood protects you from the jackals. Our Lord's skin is highly valued and He allowed it to be pierced for you. His blood sanctifies your conscience.

After He was raised from the dead, Jesus asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?" Peter knew that he was being restored. Did Peter's love increase, after that wretched denial? Did Peter's love increase, after being loved despite his failure? "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Love is alive among us this Lent. Christ's love is alive among us this Lent.