

Title: Epic Fail

Mark 14:26-31; 66-72

<sup>26</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. <sup>27</sup> And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written,  
‘I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be scattered.’

<sup>28</sup> But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” <sup>29</sup> Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” <sup>30</sup> Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” <sup>31</sup> But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same.

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66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” 68 But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. 69 And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” 70 But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” 71 But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” 72 At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

Throughout this series of teachings, I have invited you to imagine Peter, the great apostle and hero of the early church, looking over Mark’s shoulder as he organizes and records the stories he has heard Pastor Peter tell many times. In a great number of these stories, we have seen Peter blow it. There have been mistakes and misunderstandings, bad ideas and bad behavior. Put this morning’s text describes Peter’s greatest failure, the likely cause for his greatest shame.

The question that has stuck with me is, Why? Why would Peter be so open about this, so brutally honest about what he had done? When we fail, our first instinct is conceal it if it all possible. We hope no one else saw what happened. We hope we can fix it before anyone else finds out. We hope to put it in the past. We hope that it will eventually be forgotten... even if we can’t forget it we hope everyone else will.

But instead of concealing, Peter open admits it. Repeatedly. He makes a point to telling everyone... “No one was closer to Jesus than me. And for all my bravado, the moment the pressure came, I caved. No just once in a moment of weakness. I denied Jesus three times.”

Like every good pastor, Peter is telling stories that speak directly to the issues and the challenges of his people. He wants to offer them the truth of the gospel – the truth about how Jesus and what God has done for us through his Son. But he also offers them the grace of the gospel – the extravagant and lavish forgiveness of God that is offered to us, no matter what we have done. Even if what we have done is deny the Son.

As Peter is writing his first letter to his churches and Mark is writing his gospel, a lot of persecuted Christians had done just that. One of the biggest challenges faced by the early church was what to do with people who had recanted on their faith in Jesus and renounced the church in the face of persecution, but later asked to be let back in. How should such people be treated? Could such people ever be trusted again? Could they be forgiven and restored? Do they even deserve to be?

After a rigorous process of learning and practicing the way of Jesus that could take as long as three years, initiates would at last be allowed to make their vows of allegiance to Jesus as Lord. They would submit to the waters of baptism, and be welcomed as sisters and brothers in Jesus' new family, the church. Yet, perhaps because of pressure from their biological families or government persecution or economic hardship, they recanted. When asked if they were Jesus followers, they lied. When told they needed to prove their loyalty to the State and to their community, they went to the local temple and made their sacrifices. They prayed to a statue of Caesar. They denied Christ.

Just like Peter did.

So instead of lecturing about failure and forgiveness, Peter makes himself a case study. He doesn't minimize his failure. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't blame someone else. He fully owns it. He owns it, so other people can own their failures too.

Failure is not an option, it is an inevitability. We will ALL fail.

**But we cannot fail so greatly that our failure is beyond God's power to heal, restore, and be glorified.**

Even when we deny him. When we are faithless, God remains faithful.

This is why confession is so important.

Illustration: My friend Les who stood up in a Recovery meeting, shared the shameful details of his addiction, and was stunned when the other people in the room just nodded. No judgement. No cringing. More like, "Yeah, ok. Anything else?" That's the beginning of recovery, the beginning of the road to freedom.

Peter didn't just tell the story so he could say, "If God can forgive me, and still use me, then God can do the same for you." He also told the story so other people could tell their story. And I imagine he told it – and kept telling it – because he learned that the more it got brought into

the light, the less power it had to define him, to shame him, and to keep him from becoming the person God had created him to be.

This sermon is intended to inspire us all to confess (to someone trustworthy.) But perhaps more importantly I hope it will inspire you to forgive. **Forgive the people who have lied to you and betrayed you.** Forgive them so you can be free of that resentment. Forgive them so they have a chance to keep growing. Jesus restored Peter. But neither of them forgot what happened. Forgiving is not about forgetting. It is about grace-powered remembering.

**Forgive yourself.** This includes forgiving yourself. Forgive yourself for having done the denying, rejecting, betraying of someone else... even and if especially if you had an excuse or justification for what you did. Let go of the excuse, take responsibility for the behavior, and let Jesus start doing the restoring work in you.

Peter wanted this story told whenever the gospel was proclaimed. It is one of the countless defeats that will be gathered up in Christ's victory.

Amen.