

**Follow: 3. Second Chances**  
**Matthew 26:31-35**  
**May 19, 2019**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Don't you just hate it when someone knows you better than you know yourself? Maybe not "hate it" but irritates you or embarrasses you, especially when you knew they would be wrong about you. "I'll be home in 5 minutes," I say. And she replies, "Yeah, right" as if she knows better. "More like 55 minutes." "No really, just 5 minutes. I have one thing to finish up and I'll be home." And guess when I get home? 5 minutes or 55 minutes later? She knows me better than I know myself! Or, "do you need me to write it down for you?" "No, I'll remember." "Ok," she replies with plenty of skepticism in her voice. And once I'm in the middle of the grocery store, I can't for the life of me remember what I was supposed to buy, but I don't want to call home and admit it so I'll buy something which invariably turns out to be wrong. Fortunately, she doesn't say what she was thinking – I know you better than you know yourself! These are minor occurrences compared to the conversation between Peter and Jesus. Peter who promises and Jesus who knows it is not a promise that Peter can keep, but Peter just doubles down on his promise – "Even if I must die alongside you, I will not deny you."

This is the story of Simon Peter, and in so many ways, his life is like ours. He is flawed, and yet striving to be a faithful follower of Jesus. It's what I say to people about making a commitment to this church. We are a people who are neither better nor worse than anyone else, but what sets us apart from other people is that we have chosen to follow Jesus – and even when we stumble and fall, we keep trying – because life is better as a follower of Jesus. And I think we are better at life when we follow Jesus.

Last week, we looked at John's account of the Last Supper which includes the washing of feet – and we heard a message about the importance of humility of service. Once again this morning, we turn to the Last Supper, the final night that Jesus shares with his disciples. They don't know that, but Jesus does. After the meal, Jesus will be arrested and taken to trial. This night is really the climax of Peter's life. When the meal is finished, Jesus says, "One of you is about to betray me." None of them can believe that. How is it even possible that any of them would betray Jesus? But what they don't know that Jesus knows is that Judas Iscariot has been planning to sell Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver. Then Jesus says, "and the rest of you will desert me." This prompts a side conversation between Judas and Jesus in which Judas says, "are you talking about me?" Judas realizes that Jesus knows. So Jesus says, "What you are going to do, go ahead and do it." And Judas leaves the room. The rest of the disciples don't really understand what they've been talking about. And they say, "Lord, it is not possible that we would desert you. That's when Peter speaks up: **"If everyone else stumbles because of you, I'll never stumble."** I'm Peter, the rock. And Jesus says, **"I assure you that, before the rooster crows tonight, you will deny me three times."** And Peter says, **"Even if I must die alongside you, I won't deny you."** I think Peter meant it. Jesus, I want to follow you. I am yours. I want to do your will. Even if I must die, I will not deny you. But then Jesus knows Peter even better than Peter knows himself.

Jesus and the remaining disciples now move to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus asks Peter, James and John to pray with him. But what happens? They fall asleep. They mean well, but they couldn't do it. And isn't that us? We mean well. Jesus, of course, we'll pray. Of course, we'll serve. Of course, we'll follow you. But then we forget or it's harder than we think. We say something or do something that is inconsistent with what it means to be a follower of Jesus or we just fall asleep. And then when a mob arrives to arrest Jesus, all but Peter run away in fear.

They desert Jesus just as he said they would. Peter doesn't run completely away. He follows from a safe distance as Jesus is taken to the home of the high priest for a middle of the night trial.

**After they arrested Jesus, they led him away and brought him to the high priest's house. Peter followed from a distance. When they lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant woman saw him sitting in the firelight. She stared at him and said, "This man was with him too." But Peter denied it, saying, "Woman, I don't know him!" A little while later, someone else saw him and said, "You are one of them too." But Peter said, "Man, I'm not!" An hour or so later, someone else insisted, "This man must have been with him, because he is a Galilean too." Peter responded, "Man, I don't know what you are talking about!" At that very moment, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered the Lord's words: "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And Peter went out and cried uncontrollably.** And there it is – that line that Peter promised he would never cross. And yet, Jesus knew. Imagine the shame, the embarrassment, he's an utter and complete failure. And we've all been there.

Last week I began reading *The Second Mountain* by New York Times columnist, David Brooks. In it, he describes his own quest for faith by using the analogy of two mountains. We get out of school, begin a career or a family and we begin to climb a mountain. That mountain is our sense of what life will be – our dreams of achievements, relationships, and accomplishments. It is on that climb that we establish our identity, cultivate our talents and try to make our mark in this world. We make promises to ourselves and to others, but then something happens. Some people get to the top of the mountain, look around and wonder, "Is this all there is?" Or some get knocked off the mountain by some failure or something happens to their career or their family. Or for some, it is an unexpected life event – the death of a child or cancer or an addiction or a life-altering accident. Whatever the cause, they are no longer on the mountain and now find themselves in a valley of bewilderment, confusion, or suffering. This could happen at any age 9-90. It is never too early or too late to be knocked off the mountain. Some people never recover and live the rest of their lives in the valley of despair. While others, find that the valley is the place where they are remade and discover who they really are. Or in my words, they discover who God thinks we are. And eventually, they come to the realization that there is a second mountain – there is a second chance at life. But this mountain has a very different focus. The second mountain is not about me, but a greater purpose – a commitment to something beyond self.

Peter is in the valley of despair. He's failed to be the person he thought he could be and the person that he hoped that Jesus would see. The question is whether there is redemption – whether he will get a second chance or will allow himself to embrace that second chance and become the person that Jesus knows he can be. You and I are not going to say – "I don't know Jesus," but by our actions, I wonder. Have I focused on me and my own self-interest (even when I told everyone it was not about me) – times when I thought something or said something that I should not have thought or said. Times when I failed to do what I should have done. I think we know what it's like to be in the valley of despair and if we've not been there, we've been close enough to see that valley.

All four gospel writers include this story. In 65 AD, Peter will be martyred in Rome. The four gospels are written between 70-95 AD – after the death of Peter. And yet, they all include this story. They don't all include every story. Why this one? The most embarrassing moment in Peter's life – the moment he failed to be everything he promised Jesus he would be. How many

of us would want our worst moment broadcast to the world and passed down through the ages? How did the writers even know about this story? I think the only reason this story exists is that Peter must have told the story – not once but over and over again. And why would Peter tell this story? Whenever I've been part of job interviews, one of the questions is to tell us about a weakness or tell us about a failure. Nobody wants to answer that – nobody. But Peter said, let me tell you what I did. That night when they arrested Jesus, I saw Jesus being put on trial and I was so afraid and they said, "Surely, you are one of them." And I said, "No, I don't even know the man." Why would he tell the story? Because he went on to say that was not the end of the story. There is hope. There is a second mountain. There is a second chance. "When Jesus came out of the tomb, he came to me and gave me another chance."

We all fall down, and Jesus is ready to lift us up. Through the years, I've sat with people who have told me about something horrible that they've done and are so ashamed. And in that moment, they are feeling no hope. But Peter would say, your life does not have to be defined by your worst moment and greatest failure. That moment could be the stepping stone that God will use to launch you into a new future. In that valley of despair – that moment when we have fallen or failed, are we focused on ourselves – or are we willing to focus on the One who offers grace and forgiveness? Peter went on to be the ROCK on which the church would be built. Sometimes there is power in telling how you've failed - to help others find hope.

Last Wednesday evening, a few people from Iglesia Piedra Viva came here to get acquainted with a few people from Messiah. We learned each other's names, read scripture, prayed for each other, and shared a meal together. It is just one of the ways that we have been building a relationship with this newly formed United Methodist Church that is reaching the Hispanic community in South Minneapolis. One of the main reasons we even have a relationship is because David Moore from our congregation has championed this partnership. So, I asked David why this partnership is so important to him. With his permission, let me tell you why. David's paternal grandmother was from Mexico, and when he was growing up he looked down on her and didn't treat her particularly well, partly because he was embarrassed by her poor English. Growing up in California he tried to distance himself from his Hispanic heritage, and if anyone asked his family of origin, he never mentioned his Mexican heritage, and if he was asked about his skin color, he would say I'm Spanish. When David was a senior in high school, his Dad who served in the Marines was transferred to Spain, prompting David to learn Spanish and also find value in another culture. A few years ago, when Jesus Perisaca, the pastor of Iglesia Piedra Viva, came to a Missions Team meeting and described this emerging ministry to the Hispanic community, it got David's attention. A second chance, really, a way of honoring his grandmother and claiming his own Hispanic heritage. Many in the Hispanic community today live in fear for their families and friends and are not always treated with respect, but David now stands proudly with them – his focus has shifted from self to others.

What's your second chance story? If you have fallen or failed – and it may be through no fault of your own. Don't let your life be defined by that moment. Jesus is the Lord of the second chance. He can take your greatest failure to launch you into a new beginning – a second mountain.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 19, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we want to follow you. And yet, we've all done plenty of things that disappointed you, hurt others and ourselves. You are a God of second chances, and we are grateful. Thank you for showing us mercy, helping us to change, and calling us into your service. Amen.

## Monday, May 20

### Scripture: Matthew 16:21-26

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day. Then Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him: "God forbid, Lord! This won't happen to you." But he turned to Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?"

**Observation:** Peter's rebuke didn't lead Jesus to back away from his talk about suffering and death in Jerusalem. Far from it. Jesus was even more resolute, saying that he calls ALL his followers to "take their cross." Don't forget: when Jesus said this, no one sold cross jewelry. A cross was a horrific implement of torture and death, a thing respectable people avoided at all costs. If anything, the cross is a reminder that there is something in me that needs to die.

**Application:** Jesus asked what the point would be of gaining earthly wealth or prestige in a way that cost eternity. "Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives?" Today, virtually no one anywhere dies on a cross. So what do you believe it means for you to "take up your cross" and follow Jesus? What is there in you that "needs to die"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, so many voices tell me that avoiding pain and sacrifice is the way to a good life. Give me a clear vision of your counter-cultural call. Let my lesser self die, so that a greater self, shaped by you, may be born. Amen.

## Tuesday, May 21

### Scripture: Mark 14:27-31

Jesus said to them, "You will all falter in your faithfulness to me. It is written, I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep will go off in all directions. But after I'm raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even if everyone else stumbles, I won't." But Jesus said to him, "I assure you that on this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." But Peter insisted, "If I must die alongside you, I won't deny you." And they all said the same thing.

**Observation:** Luke reported that the argument among the disciples about which of them should be the greatest invaded their Passover Supper with Jesus. That may have been one trigger for Jesus to tell them they would all falter in their faithfulness. Peter offered no ringing endorsement of his fellow disciples—if anything, he "threw them under the bus" as far more likely to fail than he was.

**Application:** John Wesley, Methodism's founder, encouraged his followers to ask themselves a set of searching questions. One was, "Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican?" How did Peter's words ("Even if everyone else stumbles, I won't") illustrate the workings of that "I'm better than others" dynamic? When are you most tempted to compare yourself favorably with others?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you know me better than I know myself. Guide me today and every day, nudging and challenging me to become more fully the person you call me to be. Amen.

### **Wednesday, May 22**

#### **Scripture: Luke 22:31-34**

"Simon, Simon, look! Satan has asserted the right to sift you all like wheat. However, I have prayed for you that your faith won't fail. When you have returned, strengthen your brothers and sisters." Peter responded, "Lord, I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!" Jesus replied, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster won't crow today before you have denied three times that you know me."

**Observation:** Where Mark recorded a generalized warning to all the disciples, Luke's research (Luke 1:1-3) led him to write that Jesus addressed a personal warning to Peter. In a touching moment, he told Peter that he had prayed for him. But the Lord responded to Peter's "I'm ready to go with you" boast with the same somber pessimism that Mark recorded as part of Jesus' talk with the disciples.

**Application:** Jesus told Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith won't fail." Now (spoiler alert), most of us already know that at the end of this story, Peter's faith did buckle, moving him to deny even knowing Jesus. Did that mean that God did not answer Jesus' prayer? What is the point of praying for someone else when we realize that God will not take away their moral freedom, and force them to do the (good) thing we'd like to see them do?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you value me enough that, through the Bible and sometimes through your Spirit's presence in me, you warn me about dangers on my spiritual journey. Teach me how to be attentive to what you want to teach me. Amen.

### **Thursday, May 23**

#### **Scripture: Mark 14:32-38**

Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John along with him. He began to feel despair and was anxious. He said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert." Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want." He came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you stay alert for one hour? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak."

**Observation:** Jesus had a profound and powerful sense of mission guiding his steps toward the cross. But that did not make the prospect of a humiliating, violent execution any easier to face. Mark wrote that "he began to feel despair and was anxious." He took his three closest disciples with him, including Peter, and asked them to "stay alert and pray." But, any prior boasting notwithstanding, they couldn't stay awake.

**Application:** One element of this story is simple irony. Peter, the disciple who confidently said, "Even if everyone else stumbles, I won't," couldn't even stay awake for Jesus! Jesus' response about the eager spirit and weak flesh recalled the psalm that said God shows compassion

“because God knows how we’re made, God remembers we’re just dust” (Psalm 103:149). When have you meant well, but just not been up to living out what God wanted you to do?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I’m so tempted to say, “Well, I’d have stayed awake with you.” Then I realize I sound like Peter. Keep me humble, putting my confidence in you more than in my own spiritual strength. Amen.

### **Friday, May 24**

#### **Scripture: Luke 22:49-51; John 18:3-12**

When those around him recognized what was about to happen, they said, "Lord, should we fight with our swords?" One of them struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. Jesus responded, "Stop! No more of this!" He touched the slave's ear and healed him.

Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, "Who are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I Am." (Judas, his betrayer, was standing with them.) When he said, "I Am," they shrank back and fell to the ground. He asked them again, "Who are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus answered, "I told you, 'I Am.' If you are looking for me, then let these people go." This was so that the word he had spoken might be fulfilled: "I didn't lose anyone of those whom you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword away! Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?" Then the company of soldiers, the commander, and the guards from the Jewish leaders took Jesus into custody. They bound him.

**Observation:** Led by Judas, what seems an absurdly large force arrived to arrest Jesus. Peter, who said, “I’ll give up my life for you” (John 13:37), bravely drew his sword to defend Jesus. Had he kept fighting, he’d likely have died. (Living for Jesus proved the harder task.) Luke, probably showing his physician’s heart (Colossians 4:14), recorded that even amid all that turmoil, Jesus paused to heal the ear that Peter’s slightly misaimed blow had cut off.

**Application:** Later Jesus told the Roman procurator Pilate, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight.... My kingdom isn’t from here.” Peter tried to fight, and Jesus stopped him. We still live in a world where violence often feels like the only viable response to evil. Is it? To what extent do you believe Jesus was right, and to what extent was his situation different from “real life”?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, when I see things that seem wrong, I so readily use words like “destroy,” “smash” or even “nuke.” But even as you faced the cross, you tried to stop the cycle of violence, not feed it. Teach me more about your ways, your kingdom. Amen.

### **Saturday, May 25**

#### **Scripture: John 18:15-18, 25-27; Luke 22:59-62**

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. 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. The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?" "I'm not," he replied. 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.

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." 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?" Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

An hour or so later, someone else insisted, "This man must have been with him, because he is a Galilean too." Peter responded, "Man, I don't know what you are talking about!" At that very moment, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered the Lord's words: "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And Peter went out and cried uncontrollably.

**Observation:** Let's review: of all the disciples, only Peter walked on water (Matthew 14:28-29). He was the first to say flat out that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:27-29). On this fateful evening, Luke wrote, "Lord," Peter said, "I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!" (Luke 22:33) Yet, when the crunch came, he wasn't, in fact, "ready." He discovered that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. He was no coward—but he was a human being facing kinds of pressure he'd never faced, and didn't anticipate.

**Application:** Peter's denial is an episode that is mentioned in all Four Gospels. It was not included to embarrass Peter. The gospel writers knew the story because Peter must have regularly told the awful truth of that episode himself. Has pressure ever led you to be ashamed of and to hide your allegiance to Jesus? What do you think Peter saw in Jesus' eyes when Jesus looked straight at him that broke his heart (and may have preserved his eternal life)? When have you grown through a failure that God's grace enabled you to embrace and learn from?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, like Peter, I need to keep learning things about myself, finding room to grow even in areas I thought I had mastered. Thank you for your ongoing grace, for nudging me to grow even in places where I may think I'm done growing. Amen.