

Friday Pre-Communion

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[0 : 00] On Sunday, we will be remembering the death of Jesus as we take our place together at His table.

And at the table, we will be doing two things. I'm sure we could name and identify more than two things, but there are two things in particular that I want to highlight that we'll be doing on Sunday morning.

First of all, we'll be recognizing that we are frail sinners, and secondly, we'll be celebrating that in Jesus we have a fitting Savior.

Recognizing that we are frail sinners, but also celebrating that Jesus is our fitting Savior. And it's on these two truths that I want to reflect this evening, and we'll do so with the help of the second passage that we read.

Well, in fact, both passages, but in particular, the second passage that we read that records the dialogue, the conversation between Jesus and Peter, and indeed the other disciples, but particularly between Jesus and Peter, where Jesus anticipates Peter's denial, and where Peter protests that he will remain faithful.

[1 : 19] Just imagine the scene. It's a familiar scene in the Bible. Just imagine the scene again this evening. The Passover supper has concluded. We began our reading just to make that very clear in terms of when this conversation took place.

The Passover supper had concluded, and Jesus, during that supper, I imagine to the bemusement of his disciples had broken the bread and declared, this is my body.

He had taken the cup and declared, this is my blood of the covenant poured out. For many, together, Jesus with his disciples have sung the Hallel Psalms, the Hallelujah Psalms, and now, perhaps still singing, they make their way to the Mount of Olives.

And this is all familiar territory for us. And on their way, or perhaps already having arrived, we don't know the order of events with precision, Jesus broaches this solemn matter of their forthcoming denial, not just Peter's denial, but of the disciples together, the denial that he knew was about to happen.

And in the dialogue, we're confronted with a frail sinner and a fitting Savior, which is the two things we want to just spend some time thinking about this evening.

[2 : 43] So, we'll begin with Peter, who we're describing as a frail sinner. What can we say about this frail sinner that, as we explore, we'll be able, I'm sure, in great measure to conclude that what is true of Peter is also true of us as frail sinners.

The first thing I want to say about Peter, this frail sinner, is that he loves Jesus. I think it's good to begin there. It's good to begin acknowledging that here is a man who loves Jesus.

Often, when we're thinking about this particular incident, the focus is on Peter's foolish pride. And, of course, we will come to that in a moment.

But I don't think that's where we should begin. Again, in the words of Peter that were rash, they were foolish in many ways and proved to be.

But in the words of Peter, where he professes his allegiance to Jesus, there in verse 33, even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.

- [3 : 53] And then again in verse 35, even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And these words do reflect and do give evidence of sincere love on the part of Peter for Jesus.
- You know, we're familiar with how the story pans out and how on the occasion when Peter is restored, we're familiar with his agonizing declaration of love at that time.
- You know that I love you. But, of course, Peter's love for Jesus did not begin following the resurrection. He loves Jesus now when this is all playing out.
- And that's the reason for his declaration of loyalty, even in the face of possible death, something that he would have been well aware of. He is a frail sinner.
- And this incident, perhaps very vividly, demonstrate how frail he was. But he is a frail sinner who loves Jesus. And is that not true of all of us who are believers?
- [4 : 56] Is that not a description of us as well? We are sinners. We fall short. We let Jesus down in many ways. We deny him, be it in dramatic ways like Peter did, or be it in ways that maybe aren't so dramatic, not so visible, not so known by others.
- But we fall short. We deny him. But we love him. We are sinners, frail sinners, who love Jesus. And we know that the reason we love him is because he first loved us.
- But we do love him. This evening, you can declare that, I'm sure. I trust you can. And humbly, but joyfully and gratefully, be able to say, yes, I am a sinner, a frail sinner, but I love Jesus.
- So he loves Jesus. That's the first thing I want to notice that we can say about Peter. But the second thing I want to say is that he means well. In his declaration of loyalty, in the promise that he makes to stand firm, he means well.
- Now, it is, I'm sure, or it was, I'm sure, his sincere intention to be loyal to Jesus, even in the most trying and dangerous circumstances.
- [6 : 16] When Peter says, as he does, then in verse 33, I never will. Others may fall away, but I never will. He means it.
- He means it. At the moment that he declares it, he means it. He's not just trying to impress others. He's not just trying to impress Jesus. He means it. He's genuine when he declares that.
- I will never let you down. I will never fall away. Not me. He is genuine in his intention to be loyal, to stand up for Jesus, to stick with Jesus.
- Indeed, the reality of that genuineness is proved just a couple of hours later when the enemies of Jesus come to arrest him.
- There, just further on in the chapter in verse 47, we see how Judas arrives accompanied by a large crowd armed with swords and clubs. A very dangerous moment for all concerned.
- [7 : 17] And what does Peter do? Well, we know what Peter does. He draws his sword, and in doing so, he signs his death warrant. Had it not been for the intervention of Jesus that saves Peter from arrest and near certain death.
- It was a foolish thing to do, but it is proof that his declaration of loyalty was a genuine one. He really meant it when he said, I will not fall away, even though others will.
- So, it was a foolish thing to do, what he did there with the soldiers who came, but it was also eloquent testimony to the sincerity of his intentions that he had previously declared.
- I think we can. I think it's right to recognize Peter for the sincerity of his intentions. I imagine many of us this evening would like to think that we would say the same regarding our allegiance to Jesus, that we would be able to say to Jesus, I will never disown you.
- I'll never fall away. The last thing I would ever want to do is to fall away from loyalty and allegiance to you.

[8 : 32] That is the sincere desire of frail, forgiven sinners such as we are. Is it not your intention to be loyal to Jesus, to serve Jesus faithfully?

Is it not your fixed purpose to be loyal to your Lord, even in trying and difficult circumstances? We who will take our place at the table on Sunday morning will do so as frail sinners who, like Peter, mean well.

Our heart is in the right place, and it's in the right place because the Lord has put it in the right place. We love Jesus as Peter loved him. We mean well as Peter meant well.

But of course, that's not the whole picture. The other truth we have to recognize that is true of Peter is that he fails miserably. He loves Jesus.

He means well, but he fails miserably. Why is that so? Why does he fail? Well, there's maybe a complex and a cocktail of reasons that can be identified, and they kind of overlap some of them.

[9 : 45] But let's just notice three reasons that we could identify that explain why it is that Peter, a man who loved Jesus, whose intentions were genuine, yet he failed.

The one that is maybe often highlighted, and rightly so, is pride. There is without doubt, I think, pride in Peter's protestations of loyalty to Jesus.

The language that Peter uses in affirming his definitive intention not to fall away is very emphatic. You know, I never will.

There in verse 33, I never will. And then in verse 35, he kind of notches, it goes up a notch. Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. There is a confidence that he's expressing that is not grounded in reality and tinged with, but more than tinged with pride on the part of Peter.

He trusts in his own willpower. He envisages dangerous and difficult situations, and he thinks, no, I can handle that. I can handle that. I'll be able to stand firm, even if that kind of situation pans out.

[11 : 06] I wonder if we could say that Peter makes the mistake of trusting in the power of his own love. He imagines that he loves Jesus more than he actually does.

He does love Jesus, but he imagines that the depth of his love is actually deeper than it actually is. And he also, as we know, carelessly and proudly compares himself to others, even to his friends who are roundabout listening to what he's saying.

Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. Or even if all fall away, rather, where he makes the comparison. Even if all fall away.

Even if these others fall away. Not me. I never will. Now, when we think about ourselves, to what extent can we be like Peter?

We may be less demonstrative in our protestations of love and loyalty to Jesus, but we may be equally proud and trusting in our own strength to keep us standing.

[12 : 14] Maybe when we envisage circumstances where our faith might be tested, our loyalty might be tested, and we think, well, we'll be okay. We'll be okay.

We'll be able to stand firm in that circumstance. If that were to happen, we'd be all right. We may be trusting in our own willpower or our own decision or the depth of our own love as we measure it, perhaps, wrongly.

We're not depending on him. We're not asking God to give us the help and the strength and the grace that we need. We're depending on ourselves. So, in the case of Peter, the reason why he fails miserably, first of all, because of his pride, but there's also, as well as pride, there's folly.

Now, pride is folly, or pride certainly is foolish, but I think we see a step jump in his proud folly and stubbornness in his second protestation of untainted loyalty.

When there in verse 35, Peter declares, even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. Why was that declaration even more foolish than the first one? Well, it was even more foolish because of what Jesus had said in between.

[13 : 32] You see, having Peter, when Peter declared, I will never fall away, Jesus then says, truly I tell you, this very night before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.

Now, Jesus hadn't told him that before he first declared his loyalty, but now he does. So, having been told that by Jesus, having heard Jesus say, you will disown me, for Peter then to retort, no I won't, was a step jump, as I say, in terms of foolishness, of proud foolishness on his part.

He just heard Jesus say in very emphatic terms, I tell you the truth, this is what's going to happen. Jesus could not have been clearer in his declaration of what Peter would do, but still Peter protests.

You wonder, was he really listening to what Jesus said? Well, I think he heard the words, he processed the words, he heard them, but did he pause and consider that if Jesus said this is the way it is, then that is the way it is, that's what was going to happen.

So, there was pride, there was folly, maybe a third element we can identify in terms of why Peter fails, and that is there was fear. When the time came, he was afraid. The profanity, the curses that came from his lips as he vehemently declared, I don't know the man.

[15 : 01] We're born of fear, and it's towards the end of the chapter that we discover that part of the story. We haven't read that part, but we're familiar with it. He was afraid. He was afraid.

When he was alone, surrounded by hostile others, he was afraid. And so, he failed miserably, as we do, and as we do often.

How do we understand this seeming contradiction? Here's Peter. He loves Jesus. He means well, but he fails miserably. Well, it's the contradiction of being human. Our sincere and worthy emotions are tainted by sin.

It doesn't make them less sincere, but it does mean that they are tainted. Sincere love and dismal failure coexist in our Christian experience.

We observe that in ourselves. Genuinely sincere intentions prove very flimsy in the face of crisis, in the face of opposition. This is not to justify our sin, but simply to acknowledge and to describe our condition.

[16 : 11] Notice just one final commentary of Matthew as he records the incident that rings so true. Matthew concludes this part of the story, declaring, And all the other disciples said the same.

They had in verse 35. This declaration of loyalty. They all said the same. Why? Because they all loved Jesus. They all meant well.

And they all failed miserably. We, you and me, with these disciples, we are the ones, frail sinners, who fail miserably often.

We are the ones who are invited to gather at the table to remember the death of Jesus for frail sinners. How we stand in need as frail sinners.

How we stand in need of a fitting Savior. And we have one. We have one in the person of Jesus. And let's just think for a few moments about our fitting Savior. Having thought about Peter, a frail sinner, that we are very like.

[17 : 16] Let's think also for a moment on Jesus, our fitting Savior. Fitting in what sense? As revealed in the passage. Well, let's look at it in this way.

Thinking about what Jesus knows, what He did, and what He does. First of all, what He knows. And there's two things I want to highlight about what Jesus knows, as we notice, or as is evident or apparent in the passage.

First of all, He knows His Father's will. He knows that He, as the shepherd, must die for His sheep. He knows that in His, and He knows that in His identity as the Eternal Son.

He knows that as He studies the Scriptures, and particularly the prophet Zechariah, where His mission is described, or this part of His mission is described. He knows that the Father's will.

We read that passage in Zechariah chapter 13, from which Jesus quotes. And not only does He know that He must die, and that the sheep will scatter, which is how He explains the actions of His disciples that He's anticipating, not only does He know that He will die, but He also knows who will strike Him.

[18 : 37] And this is a very solemn knowledge for Him to have. You see, in the original passage in Zechariah that we read, and we can maybe just remind ourselves by reading one of the three verses, not all three, but in Zechariah chapter 13 and verse 7, we discover who it is that strikes the blow or who orders the sword come down upon the shepherd.

In verse 7 of chapter 13 of Zechariah, a sword against my shepherd. Jesus identifies Himself as the shepherd who is spoken of here in the prophecy. A sword against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me, declares the Lord Almighty.

Who is it who gives the order, as it were, for the sword to strike the shepherd? It is the Father. It's the Father who gives the order that the sword come and strike the shepherd.

And Jesus knows this. What profound, what dark knowledge in many ways for Jesus to bear as He anticipates His death, the death that He knows is coming, and that He knows that it is His Father who will give the order for the shepherd to be struck, because this is the plan hatched in eternity to provide redemption for sinners.

And so He knows. He knows His Father's will. This is what Jesus knows as He sets His face to Calvary as our fitting Savior.

[20 : 12] But not only does He know His Father's will, He knows His disciples. Jesus' conviction concerning their imminent falling away is grounded in His own omniscience as the eternal Son of God.

It's grounded in His own infallible understanding of the prophetic scriptures that He draws on. But it's also grounded in His knowledge of them as frail sinners.

He knows them. He knows Peter. He knows the others. He knows what they're like. He knows what will happen because He knows them. He knows they're frail. He knows they're weak.

He knows all of these things. And though they're falling away, that He knows is just around the corner, grieves Him deeply.

It doesn't surprise Him and it doesn't shock Him because He knows them. And He knows you. He knows us. He knows that we will fail Him.

[21 : 11] He knows that even having reflected on this matter this evening, even gathering around the table and remembering the Lord's death on Sunday morning, Jesus knows that next week we will all fail Him in one way or another.

And again, that's not to justify being careless in terms of our loyalty to Jesus, but simply to acknowledge that that is the reality of our condition. And Jesus knows that that's what we are like.

So He's a fitting Savior in terms of what He knows, His knowledge of the Father's will, His knowledge of His own disciples. But then, very particularly, He's a fitting Savior with regard to what He did.

See, not only did He know His mission, not only did He read the prophet Zechariah and identify Himself as the shepherd who needed to be struck, He doesn't just know that that needs to happen.

He embraces that mission that is His. He hands Himself over to death to be struck by the Father as the only and sufficient sacrifice for sin, your sin and my sin.

[22 : 17] And so He embraces that death in the place of sinners. And He rises again from the grave, something He also anticipates in this conversation with His disciples.

There in verse 32, but after I have risen, what is actually said there by Jesus, captured more precisely by the ESV is, but after I am raised up, Jesus hands Himself over to death.

His work is done. He can cry out, it is finished. And it is the Father who has the joyful task of raising His faithful Son from the grave.

But after I am raised up, after my Father raises me up. Was there any doubt in the mind of Jesus at this point concerning His Father's vindication as declared by the resurrection?

Well, it would seem not. Notice the almost matter-of-fact way in which He declares His confidence that this is indeed going to be the outcome.

[23 : 23] But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. There's no doubt that that will be the outcome. There's no questioning whether that is what will happen.

No, for Jesus it is very clear, it's abundantly clear that that will be the outcome. Yes, He will die, but yes, He will rise again. The Father will raise Him up from the dead, and He will be able to go on ahead of them into Galilee.

What He knows, what He did, then finally what He does. And here what I'm trying to do is to recognize the continuing work of Jesus on behalf of His flock, on behalf of His sheep, to use the language that's being used or the picture that's being used here.

And it's explicitly highlighted by Jesus in His words to His disciples, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. The shepherd who would die for His sheep has a continuing shepherding role.

Jesus does not do the main thing, provide a way of forgiveness and salvation, and then take a step back and leave His disciples to their own devices. That's not what He does.

[24 : 33] No, His permanent concern is to go before, go ahead, accompany His disciples in their walk and in their lives.

When Jesus died, the disciples, I'm sure, anticipated heading disconsolately back to Galilee, leaving behind in Jerusalem the corpse of their master.

But when Jesus rose from the grave, He reminded them of the plan. You remember at His resurrection when the women appeared at the tomb and Jesus gave them a message for His disciples, tell My disciples that I'm going to go ahead of them to Galilee.

They'll find Me in Galilee. I wonder when that message was communicated to the disciples, did they then remember this conversation as they had made their way to the Mount of Olives?

That's what He said. That's what He said. Jesus has this continuing shepherding role for His disciples. And that was true for His disciples, the original disciples, but it's also true for us as His disciples.

[25 : 47] Nothing has changed. We, this weekend, and on Sunday morning in particular, we'll look back on what Jesus has done, what He did for us. 2,000 years ago, what He did that will never be repeated, that doesn't need to be repeated, it's something that has been done.

That aspect of His work is indeed finished, as He Himself declared, it is finished. But Jesus continues to work on our behalf.

He continues to be our shepherd. He continues to go on ahead of His people, leading the way. We think of Peter himself, interestingly, in his first letter, in chapter 2 and in verse 35, he speaks of Jesus as the shepherd and overseer of our souls.

Presently, in the present, in the here and now, the shepherd and overseer of our souls. And so, we who are frail sinners find in Jesus a fitting Savior.

And so, on Sunday morning, we will take our place at the table in that confidence. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we are frail sinners. Yes, we fail Jesus miserably in so many ways.

[27 : 11] And yet, in Jesus, we have one who is able to forgive us, a fitting Savior, who knows us, who has embraced the mission that He was given to save us, and who continues to shepherd us as His people.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Son, our Savior, Jesus. We thank You that He is indeed our altogether sufficient Savior.

He is the only Savior of sinners, and He is the sufficient Savior of sinners. And that is who we are. We are sinners. We give evidence of that in so many ways.

We thank You that we have in Jesus one who is able to deal with us and to forgive us, to save us, and to shepherd us day by day.

We thank You for the opportunity to reflect on our Savior and to thank You for Him as we do now and as we will be doing over this weekend.

[28 : 21] And we pray in His name. Amen.