

Peter's denial

There are two trials going on here. Neither one is an official trial – for Jesus that will be when he meets Pilate.

Peter's trial is an unofficial trial by a charcoal fire. He is repeatedly asked if he is a disciple of the arrested man. This is a little different question than is asked in the other three gospels. There, the question was you were with Jesus weren't you? It was a question about Peter's association with Jesus.

This question goes deeper – Are you this man's disciple? And in his answer – I am not – it's not just Peter's association with Jesus he's denying. He is denying his very identity. This will be the key as we think about ourselves in this story.

Peter will get a redo, again around a charcoal fire on a beach. But it won't be until after Jesus' resurrection and it will be before Jesus himself.

But here, in the courtyard, Peter's trial ends essentially with his conviction.

But at a deeper level in this story what is on trial is two different understandings of power.

When we hear the story of Peter's denial, we might hear him get called a coward, or weak. And maybe that is true. We really aren't told what was going through his head.

But it's worth noting that just before this, at Jesus' arrest, Peter cut off the ear of the High Priest's slave. Right there in front of Temple police and Roman soldiers! Many might see that as pretty brave.

What if it isn't fear that leads Peter to deny his relationship with Jesus? What if instead it's strategy?

Peter sees himself as a protector of Jesus. If he sees his primary role as keeping bad things from happening to Jesus, then maybe what he's thinking here is that he needs to proceed with caution.

His thinking might be that If he gets killed or arrested, he will be of no use to Jesus. He will have failed in the role he sees himself in.

If that is the case, then what's at question here is not his courage. It's that his worldview has not kept up with Jesus. He is still following the world's paradigm where power is concerned. And in that paradigm, he knows he's very vulnerable here, and vulnerability is not a path to victory.

Annas, Caiaphas, the soldiers, the police – they are operating according to the world's way of understanding power. Intimidation, threats, violence.

In the garden, when Peter pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of the slave, he too was operating by that same understanding. Jesus refuses to play that game.

Peter does not yet know that the game has changed.

He will figure it out, gradually. In the end, he too will end up dying during a Roman persecution of Christians.

But here, he does what he feels he needs to do to stay alive.

Peter's vulnerability by the fire is where the church stands now. The church is called to witness and claim its identity as a follower of the crucified Christ in the face of a world that primarily trusts raw power.

We are not being asked if we know Jesus. That's not that hard to say. People might even be willing to say Jesus is their personal Lord and Savior.

We are being asked if we are Jesus' disciples. And that makes a difference.

We will need to ask ourselves the hard questions. And among the hardest will be questions about power and violence.

Not everyone who was Jewish wanted Jesus dead. In fact most probably didn't. After all, Jesus did some pretty amazing things for ordinary people. He healed people – even brought one back from the dead.

He turned water to wine and saved a wedding celebration. He taught a way of life based on love. In fact that was his explicit teaching to his disciples on this very night – before his arrest.

As I have loved you, so you should love one another. And that teaching extends to disciples today...to us.

But also, in a symbolic act that envisioned the end of the Temple, he turned over the tables of the money changers and drove out the sellers.

As time went on, it became more and more clear to the religious authorities that Jesus was a threat to their power. And they were concerned that Jesus would bring down the wrath of Rome on them.

Finally, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the authorities knew Jesus needed to be dead.

Now they needed to pull Rome in. In the first line of what we read, there is an alliance of Jewish Temple police and Roman soldiers that arrive to arrest Jesus.

And ultimately, Rome will execute him. Religious power and political power working together end in a violent death for Jesus. That's where the world's way of using power leads.

Jesus' way is going to be radically different. But Peter is not there yet. So when asked in the midst of a fraught and frightening scene, he denies being a follower of Jesus.

Now, we stand at that same crossroads. Are you one of Jesus' disciples?

A disciple is someone who learns from their teacher. They try to adopt those teachings in their lives and try to live as their teacher lives. They try to be like the teacher.

While Jesus was sharing that last meal with his disciples, after washing their feet, he told them that was the approach they should take...humble service rather than arrogance and imposing one's will on others.

He told them that the world would know his disciples by their love. This morning I looked at my Facebook memories. In 2017 I shared a quote from one of my teachers – Father Richard Rohr. He said only love can handle power.

2000 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, war and violence too often continue to be the default choice for humanity to solve problems.

Answering yes to the question, are you one of Jesus' disciples at a minimum calls us to be uneasy with the world's understanding of power and its reliance on violence. It will never bring lasting peace.

Only the power of love – the kind of love Jesus taught and modeled – can do that.

But for most of us, we stand with Peter and still believe that is too risky. At a minimum, it's considered naïve.

But here's the good news. Jesus' willingness to die rather than fight back with violence took the power of death away from the ruling authorities.

And in his resurrection, Jesus' way of love wins over the powers of violence.

In Jesus' last appearance to his disciples after his resurrection, he cooked them breakfast around another charcoal fire.

He turned to Peter three times and asked him, Simon do you love me? Each time he answered yes Lord, you know I do. And three times Jesus said, feed my sheep. That was Peter's redemption.

In place of his threefold denial, three times he could reclaim his identity as a disciple of Jesus. And three times, Jesus told him what that discipleship means...feed my sheep. It's back to that humble service thing again.

We too will have our weak moments. We too will fail to understand what Jesus is truly asking of us as disciples.

But like Peter, Jesus will keep asking us...he will keep giving us opportunities to claim our identity.

He will stay with us as we become more willing to be bold in that identity...and he will stay with us if we continue to be fearful.

And he will keep reminding us that to be a disciple means to love one another, just as he first loved us.