



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Is It I?" - Luke 22:54-60 (Gospel of Luke Series)

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When I was an associate pastor at First Pres Berkeley, one of the areas of ministry that I loved was my work with young adults. One day, Peter Little, who was one of my interns and eventually became the Director of Young Adult Ministries at First Pres Berkeley, invited me to go rock climbing. You're going to meet Peter in September when he comes out to take part in my installation service.

On a Saturday morning we met at a rock-climbing gym in Berkeley. I had never really done this before, so I had a mixture of both excitement and a healthy dose of anxiety. Peter gave me a short course in belaying, which is a skill I needed to learn if he was going to trust me with his life. I would be responsible for saving him from serious injury or death if he fell off the wall.

He apparently had enough confidence in me because I talked him into climbing the wall first. Like a champ, he made it to the top with ease. Now it was my turn. With Peter back on the ground we switched ends of the rope. I tied the knots on the harness around my waist. While I did that, Peter prepared to belay me. We double-checked the knots. They were tied correctly. Everything was locked and secure. It was now my turn to climb the wall.

Just before I started up the route, a little eight-year-old girl scampered up the wall on the route next to me and I thought to myself, "I'm really going to be embarrassed if I mess this up." Fortunately, I made it easily up the first wall. I felt completely comfortable climbing. I had no problem rappelling off the top. I trusted Peter and his ability to hold me securely as I climbed and descended the wall.

For about the next hour we took turns climbing different routes. We increased the difficulty with each climb. Just before I went up the route that would be my first really big challenge, Peter said something that has become for me a picture of what Christian community is about. He said, "One of the most important experiences a novice rock climber has is the first time they lose their grip and fall off the wall." My first thought was, "That doesn't sound good." And then I thought, "That's not going to happen to me today."

Peter looked at me and calmly said, "The first time you lose your footing or your grip and fall off the wall you will learn something very important that will actually help you climb with greater confidence. What you'll discover is that you are SAFE even if you fall. Your climbing partner will hold you safely on the wall."

On the very next climb at about 35 feet off the floor, I lost my grip and I fell off the wall. Peter was right. A friend saved my life. I could have fallen 35 feet to the ground. I only dropped about three inches. He held me securely. As I fell back off the wall, my immediate reaction was to grab for the rope. Peter shouted from the floor, "Hey, get your hands off that rope. I've got you. Just relax and rest. Start climbing again when you're ready."

Christian community is one of God's greatest gifts to us. It's in community that I CAN learn to trust that God holds me securely. God is not going to cut me loose when I fall. It's in community that I can learn to trust the love of God, and it is in my relationship with God that I am empowered to be in relationship with others.

When I'm part of a healthy spiritual community, when I'm a part of a community where people understand AND trust the grace of God, it is there that I discover that I can fail and I am still held securely by God and by the people God has given me. I'm safe. When I fall off the wall and find myself dangling over thin air, I can rest until I'm ready to start climbing again. I'm held safely in a relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. My brothers and sisters in Christ who are climbing with me hold me.

I never need to fear that God is going to abandon me or cut me loose.

Jesus Christ is the one who has made all of that possible. He secured this safety for us by his willingness to fully experience something we will never have to experience. Jesus Christ was completely abandoned. In His hour of greatest need, everyone cut Him loose. And because He was willing to go through all of that, we never need to fear being abandoned by God.

Today, we're going to look at three of the people who cut Jesus loose in His hour of greatest need. And that is going to teach us something very important about the grace of God.

I've got one more climbing story for you today. "Touching the Void" is the story of two men who set out to climb Siula Grande, a 20,000-foot mountain in Peru. Both men make it to the summit, but on their way down one of the climbers loses his footing. He falls and breaks his leg. To make matters worse an intense storm engulfs the mountain. The only thing they can think to do is to lower the guy with the broken leg down the face of the mountain. No one can help them. They're on their own.

As the injured climber is lowered down the snow-covered slope his friend accidentally lowers him over a cliff. The storm is so fierce that they can't hear or see one another. As the injured man goes off the cliff he starts to pull his friend faster and faster down the face of the mountain. The guy lowering his friend is finally able to stop their slide. They still can't see or hear each other.

The man lowering his friend down the mountain assumes that his friend is now dangling off a cliff. He has no idea of how high that cliff is. He has no idea how far off the ground his climbing partner is. They hang there for an hour. The climber, who is holding his friend on the mountain, does not have the strength to pull his friend back up the hill. He knows that both of them are going to die if they stay there.

After an hour the healthy climber remembers that he has a small knife in his ruck sack. He knows that the only way to save himself is to cut his friend loose. So he pulls out the knife, opens it up, and places the blade next to the taught rope that is being stretched by the weight of the climber hanging off the cliff.

This scene in the video reenactment of this moment is very intense. As his friend hangs helplessly over the cliff he puts the blade of the knife against the rope and cuts him loose. His friend falls 150 feet. He breaks through a layer of snow and falls into a crevice. His friend knew that he had to cut his climbing partner loose if he was going to save himself.

That is super extreme but it's actually an experience all of us know something about. Judas and Peter, two of Jesus' disciples, found themselves in a situation that felt just like that and that's what we read about in Luke chapter 22.

Everyone cuts Jesus loose in these closing moments before His arrest and crucifixion. We're going to look at three of the persons who abandon Jesus in His moment of greatest need. Peter is one of them. You saw that in the

text that we just read. Before we take a look at him, the first person to cut Jesus loose is Judas. He hands Jesus over to the religious authorities for a handful of silver coins. Why did he do it?

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, says the best explanation for why Judas betrayed Jesus is rather ordinary and common. We'd prefer to see Judas either as one of the worst people in the history of the world or as a political revolutionary who wanted Jesus to seize control of Israel and overthrow the Romans. We want Judas to be some kind of extremist, because we don't want to see ourselves in him or see a Judas in us.

To understand why Judas cuts Jesus loose we need to go back in the story. During His last meal with his disciples just before His crucifixion, Jesus suddenly announced to His disciples that one of them would betray Him. When He said that in the middle of dinner something remarkable happened. All of His disciples did something completely out of character. All of them turned to Jesus and asked, "Is it Me? Am I the one?" You don't get that detail in Luke 22. You find that very important piece of information in Matthew 26.

The fact that all of the disciples ask, "Is it me?" is very surprising. These guys were very competitive. They frequently had arguments about which of them was the greatest. They had one of those fights right here in Luke 22. They got in a discussion about who was the greatest. The greatest what? The greatest fisherman? The strongest man? The fastest fishing net cleaner? The most spiritual?

It doesn't matter. You put 12 boys, 12 teenage guys, 12 men in the same room, on the same ball field, in the same classroom, in the same office and you're eventually going to get a discussion about who's the greatest. It's part of the fun of being a guy. But let me hasten to say that the guys haven't cornered the market on this either. A couple of Jesus' first disciples even got their mom to ask Jesus to let her boys sit at his right and left hand.

When Jesus says that tonight one of you is going to turn your back on Me and cut Me loose—they ALL said, "Jesus, is it me? Is it me?" That was a stunning outbreak of humility and honesty. Every one of them, John, James, Nathaniel, Levi and even Peter, apparently, wondered out loud whether they could be the one who would sell Him out.

Here's my key point for us today. This is what I want us to think deeply about. It has everything to do with our understanding of the gospel. Our ability to ask and answer this same question, "Lord is it I?" stands at the heart of our capacity to experience the love and grace and mercy and compassion that God is ready to shower upon us.

Until you and I can join these first disciples and wonder whether it could be us who will sell Jesus out, we will not be in a position to receive the grace and love Jesus is offering us. And until we can admit that, "Yes, it is me," we will not be in a position to really hear and experience the greatest news the world has ever heard.

Why does Judas betray Jesus? Why do all His disciples have this moment when they wonder

whether or not it just might be them who will sell Jesus out? When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowd that greeted Him on the road leading into the city hailed Him as the king of Israel. Palm branches were in the air. The people begged Jesus to save them from their political oppressors. They cheered Him as their long-awaited Messiah. They wanted Him to be their George Washington. Here was their king, riding into the capital city.

Jesus brought all that acclamation on Himself by the way He entered Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was in an uproar and the religious and secular authorities were scared. The authorities now had to either agree with the people who were ready to crown Him king, they had to either acknowledge who this was and bow to Him as their king, or they had to get rid of Him.

The situation starts to come unraveled at the beginning of Luke 22. Listen to verses 1 and 2: "Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people."

The political and religious leaders had a choice. Hail Jesus as their king or cut Him loose. Jesus was a threat to their power. He was a threat to everything they thought that they had to have. He'd spoken truth about their need. He told them that they needed someone to do for them what they could never do for themselves. They needed a Savior. And they hated Him for telling them that was the way it is. So, they made the decision to put Him to death.

By the time Jesus gathers His disciple for their last meal together, a good portion of Passover week was behind them. It had been a number of days since that triumphal entry into Jerusalem and Jesus has not seized control of the nation. He has shown no indication that He is going to assert political control over Israel. He just continued to do and teach what He had done and taught.

So here's what probably occurred to Judas and it is probably what also occurred to all of the disciples. "If I don't get myself on the side of the authorities who have the power I'm going to lose my life. I'm going to be seen as a co-conspirator and it's going to cost me everything." It's safe to assume that all the disciples thought that very same thing and that is why they all asked Jesus, "Is it me? Am I the one you're talking about? Am I going to sell you out in order to protect myself and my family?"

Judas acts on his fears. To save himself, he cuts Jesus loose. Judas is a person, just like many of us, who will follow Jesus when it looks like there is a chance at power and glory by following Him. But when he sees that there is actually going to be a cost to following Jesus, he sells Him out. He protects his own hide and picks up a little cash in the process.

Does any of that sound familiar? Let's be honest. The truth is we all understand exactly what that fear feels like. If we were in this situation, most likely all of us would be asking ourselves that very same question. "Is it I?" In fact, we often find ourselves in situations exactly like that.

When it looks like it's going to cost us to follow Jesus we sell Him out, we cut Him loose to protect ourselves and maybe pick up a little cash along the way. This is a garden-variety, run of the mill, everyday kind of sin. We all do this. If we're honest, we know we want to cut Jesus loose when the price of following Him gets too high. Judas cut Jesus loose.

The second person in this passage who turns his back on Jesus, who cuts Him loose in his hour of greatest need, is Peter. Peter, one of his closest disciples, turns his back on Jesus for the same reason Judas cuts Jesus loose. Like Judas, Peter turns his back on Jesus because he's afraid. He's afraid that if he is tied to Jesus, he will suffer the same fate Jesus is facing.

Instead of acknowledging how weak he actually is, instead of acknowledging the truth that he's up for following Jesus when it works for him, instead of acknowledging that he, too, will abandon Jesus just like everyone else when it starts to get tough, instead of asking for help—Peter tells Jesus that he's different from everyone else. Even though other people will cut Jesus loose he would never do something like that.

Peter won't admit his weakness and that sets him up for this failure. That is a huge mistake. Because it is only in giving up on ourselves that we can find our true selves. It's only by saying, "Yes, it is me," that we will find ourselves in the place where we can receive the love and grace of God.

Peter and Judas were afraid. Fear is a perfectly understandable and, at times, an appropriate emotion. But fear can lead us to

do some pretty stupid things. Bad decisions are often powered by our fears. Our addictions are often frantic attempts to sooth our anxieties. And one of our greatest fears is the fear of being cut loose by others and by God Himself. When we're afraid that God will cut us loose, we have not understood the gospel and we haven't really understood the grace of God.

Here comes the most surprising part of the story. The third person who abandons Jesus is God Himself. God the Father cuts His Son loose. That's what begins to happen in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus considers the work He needs to do for all of us on the cross. He sweats great drops of blood as God shows Him what He must do to save us. On the cross, Jesus takes upon Himself the sins of the world and God the Father cuts Him loose.

Think about this. Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to experience the abandonment of His Father and the abandonment of everyone else in order to save us. Jesus was willing to be cut loose so that we would never experience being abandoned by God. If Jesus loved us that much that even all of that did not stop Him from doing what had to be done to rescue us, there is nothing that you and I could ever do that would separate us from the love of Christ.

Do you know that in the depths of your heart and mind? It is only when we can begin to live our lives wrapped in this unshakeable love that we will be able to respond with forgiveness and grace when other people abandon us. It's only when we know that no matter what, we will never be abandoned by God because Jesus was willing to be

cut loose by everyone including God Himself so that we never would be.

That's what this communion table is all about. This table is an invitation to go climbing with Jesus. This table tells us that you and I can slip off the wall. We can lose our grip on our lives, we can completely fail and we will still be safe...because we are being held by God Himself.

When it comes to the most important issues of life, when it comes to knowing where you stand with God, Jesus will never cut you loose. He will not let you fall. Do you believe that? It is my prayer that you will know and trust that you are safe in His loving and strong embrace. It is my prayer that you will know that in the deepest places of your soul. He will not cut you loose. You are safe. Let's pray.

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Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com