



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 17, 2019

"Untamed Fire" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Mark 14:26-31

Context: This is right after two significant events - One was Jesus revealing that Judas would betray Him. The other was Jesus sharing a Passover meal with His disciples. He is perhaps only hours from being arrested, abandoned by His disciples, and beaten by authorities.

26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27 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.' 28 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." 29 Peter said to Him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." 30 Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." 31 But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with You, I will not deny You." And all of them said the same.

Ever see someone get a little too passionate? To the point where what they are doing is completely incongruent to what is going on around them?

Check out this clip of an overzealous drummer. The video starts out with a woman singing a famous Frank Sinatra song, My Way. As it is time for the drums to enter the song something amazing begins to take place.

Congregation watched a video: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9kPfelTEds>)

I like how we see just when you think the guy is about to mellow out he explodes into another round of wild grandiose gestures. He is so flamboyant that you don't even hear the singer anymore. Even if it was a little over the top you have to admit this drummer was passionate.

But isn't the goal and passion of a band member supposed to support the singer and not over-shadow them? Yet it seemed like the singer and the drummer were on entirely two different wavelengths.

Today we continue in our sermon series from the gospel of Mark called Hope Restored and as you just heard from our reading today we see something similar to that drummer and that singer: The backup team was on

a different wavelength than the Leader and like that drummer the apostle Peter was a man of passion but, is passion enough to get it right as Christians? What is the cost of an Untamed Fire when it misses the mark?

Peter is probably one of my favorite biblical characters to talk about, mostly because I can totally relate to how human he is. Like me, He is the kind of Christ-follower who is able to say or do something so incredible one minute, but then in seconds manages to completely mangle it up. Let's slowly go through this text and see what I mean.

Remember that these events are right after the whole Judas storming out scene, where Judas was identified as the one who would betray Jesus. I'm wondering if the disciples after they sang that hymn and went out are thinking, "Glad we got all that betrayal stuff out of the way and it wasn't me!" But just when you think the coast is clear Jesus lays this one on them:

Mark 14:26 "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

When Peter hears this shocking statement (and it must have been shocking) there are no more humble inquiries of, 'Is it I?' like at the Last Supper. No, now he goes full bore into Zealot Mode and declares emphatically his allegiance with Jesus.

Mark 14:29 - Peter said to Him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." How's that for humility? I wonder if was he gesturing toward the other disciples when he said 'all'? And then Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you..." By the way, whenever Jesus sets up something with 'Truly I tell you...' that is code for 'What I'm about to say here is unwavering truth.'

So Jesus says here, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you (Peter) will deny Me three times."

Now you would think this would slow the role of most people, but not with Peter. He is like that drummer who sits for a moment only to get up again and become even more dramatic. He just doubles down and ratchets up his rhetoric to Jesus: "But he (Peter) said vehemently, "Even though I must die with You, I will not deny You. And all of them said the same." Peter's fire apparently has spread to the rest of the apostles.

Briefly let me add this piece; We see Peter's out of control zeal quite starkly later on in the evening when Jesus is finally arrested and they are in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Gospel of John paints it this way in John 18:10. Let me

summarize it this way, When the Jewish authorities come to take Jesus, Peter picks up a sword and violently acts out on behalf of Christ by cutting off a man's ear.

We see here that Peter is not only willing to die for Jesus, but he's willing to kill for Jesus. You talk about passion and zeal! But Jesus once again rebukes Peter. We see this in Matthew 26: "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who take the sword will die by the sword."

Peter is living by the sword, Jesus is living by the cross. So again his untamed passion is undermining His leader's goal, not supporting it. Bottom line, very often (though not always) zeal is not a good barometer that you got it right about the things of God.

The Jewish people saw this problem hundreds of years before Christ and someone made note it like this: Proverbs 19:2 says: *'It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the mark.'*

Knowledge here is not merely referring to some sort of high IQ or the kind you get from taking lots of AP classes in high school. It has more to do with wisdom, discernment, having an understanding.

In other words, without being discerning and understanding as to the goal and the way to that goal, one's well-intended zeal can cause us to miss God's mark by a mile. and isn't that exactly what happens to Peter? After three years he still

isn't quite clear about Jesus' mission, nor is he clear in understanding his own shortcomings so he misses the mark badly.

As I said before I can really relate to Peter. You may be surprised to hear this, but as a young preacher, I was a little over the top in my delivery. In fact, I was like Peter on steroids.

My close friend told me after speaking to a chapel of hundreds of college students on the Good Samaritan and helping the poor, "Well you were really on fire, you definitely got your point across, but you scorched the first two rows with your fire in the process"

Now here is the thing, instead of heeding his words I just thought, 'Oh well, that's on them. I'm preaching God's word. Let them deal with it.' Like Peter, I lacked the humility to take in the wise words of my friend.

After all, I reasoned to myself, when I preached I used scripture. I used personal experience. I made sure I was theologically correct and sound, and every example I gave was based in fact and reality. I wasn't exaggerating embellishing or making stuff up.

I lived it man! I lived with refugees and tribal people. I knew what it was like to see lepers and the faces of people experiencing profound hunger. These experiences not only made my fire hot but stubborn, and a bit arrogant.

I say stubborn because I continued to preach that way despite my friends' words until one particular incident.

I preached my sermon on the Good Samaritan at one church and as usual afterward, people either avoided me or told me how much passion I had but one nice, older woman, who walked with a cane walked slowly up to me and said: "Young man, that was some message! I haven't felt that guilty in years!" And that's when I knew my fire was missing the mark.

My goal, my mark was to motivate Christians to love on and help the poor. The goal was transformation, action, conviction, etc. But the reality was, mostly what I left behind was guilt.

Look let's get real, most guilt only gets a few miles per gallon. For most, it only lasts as far as the end of the church driveway. Moreover, guys like me often want to justify our zeal, our untamed fire by pointing to Jesus in the temple when He went around forcefully driving out moneychangers, or when He verbally excoriated the Pharisees (as in Matthew 23). If it's good enough for Jesus, its good enough for me. In other words, we have biblical justification for our fire and frankly, maybe sometimes it is justified to get that harsh.

But if we are honest, we zealous folks rarely seek to restrain, redirect, or tame our fire by reflecting honestly and deeply on other startling words and acts of Jesus. Like 'love your enemy',

Or Jesus on the cross, 'Father forgive them (those people who are killing Me) for they know not what the do.'

And by the way, all that over the top talk about the poor moved very few to be more compassionate and caring and generous. They got excited, but few went into action. But when I would simply invite people to hang out with those who were poor, to meet the folks I worked with and hung out with, I saw people really start to change. It was through personal interaction, and not me hammering anyone and being overzealous, that won folks over, and that was the mark to hit.

A similar point I want to make is this. Zeal for a good thing without the wisdom of God can easily end up dismissing others, judging others, even vilifying others

Let me elaborate, Perhaps the most glaring and alarming incident of this happened just last month. I'm talking about the incident at the Lincoln Memorial involving a group of boys from Covington Catholic High School and this boy in particular:

Showed congregation a picture of a boy facing a Native American man playing the drum.

That incident was initially framed as this kid and his school mates harassing a Native American man who said he was trying to bring peace. This one picture alone touched off thousands of angry and hostile tweets, articles, Facebook posts, and news reports. However, as

more details came out, as more understanding came out about the incident many of those tweets were erased and even reporters admitted they jumped the gun.

When you see this picture and recall that incident what are you feeling viscerally? What do you see? Is this a teenager caught in an awkward moment? Or is this the smirk of a racist. What do you see?

I'm not here to adjudicate in any way the guilt or innocence of this young man. Please feel free to hold your own opinion. I just want to point out the passionate and zealous reaction to the incident by full-grown, educated, adults; Adults who found it their moral duty to blast off incendiary and even violent words into the Twitter-sphere.

So passionate and confident that he understood completely what happened here by looking at a short video clip, a well-known professor, scholar, and writer on religion tweeted this, "Honest question. Have you ever seen a more punchable face than this kid's?" Believe me, his words weren't the worst. A famous Hollywood producer tweeted that these high school boys needed to be thrown head first into a wood chipper.

Take that in a second: A college professor and a Hollywood Producer advocating violence against a minor. When you advocate violence toward kids shouldn't there be a warning bell going off in your head?

Their words remind me of this proverb: Prov. 18:2: *'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing their personal opinion.'* I think if we all just followed this one verse Twitter would shut down tomorrow.

Look, let me give these folks the benefit of the doubt. They were really upset at what they saw as a racist act. We should all be upset by the issue of racism, that's a good thing. That's a godly thing. But was this kind of zealotry against racism hitting the mark or missing the mark? Didn't anyone find it a bit ironic that as people are expressing moral outrage they were calling forth morally outrageous acts - on minors no less? And that is what makes their words not just wrong, but dangerous. This kid and his family's life were threatened; their address was put up online on the Internet. This is how blind unrestrained, unwise, untamed fire can make us.

Now as we recall that story in D.C. let's not fall into the 'Peter Syndrome,' as I call it. In other words, let's not fall into thinking that "Even if those other people would do that I would never do that!"

Let me tell you straight up, we all have our hot button issues that can release the untamed zeal in our hearts, don't we? What's yours?

What's that issue in which your heart and mind is filled with not only disdain for another but a zealous arrogance in your own heart?

Is it talking about Conservatism? Liberalism? Build the wall? The MeTOO movement? Racism? Abortion? Same-sex marriage? White Male Privilege? Etc. Can we just admit it? We need to name it so we can nail it. We can't overcome what we overlook.

So how do we overcome this kind of problem and be better witnesses for Christ and His agenda for the world? Not mine, or some political party, or some identity group - His agenda for the world? I could write a book on it, but let me just mention one major thing as a lesson which I derive from Peter's well-meaning, but often flawed journey with Jesus. Be intentional about working on Humility.

To make sure you never fall as a Christian into the Peter Syndrome be sure to have a very sober view of the reality of your own life, of your own capacities for really blowing it.

Humility is not an exercise in self-flagellation or self-denigration. It is simply having a sober and realistic understanding of who you are and what you are capable of doing - both good and not so good.

Peter's vehement promises to Jesus seems nearly void of any sober view of his potential, or his proclivity, or even his own history for messing up. His lack of humility comes out as, "even if everyone else does desert you I won't..." What makes him so darn confident that he is better than others?

As a young Christian, I got great advice from my mentor at the time. He would hold up his fingers like this (forefinger and thumb separated by a very small distance), and say, 'Steve, we are all this close (to failing God)!' That has stuck with me for more than three decades of ministry and it has kept me grounded. That and the fact that as a non-Christian I was capable of doing things that most of you would find not only wrong, but also despicable. And in having a sober grasp of my own potential and capacity for profound wrongdoing I am better set up to restrain and redirect my judgmental zeal with the various people I talk to when they disclose some pretty God-awful things.

I was talking to our Young Adult director, Jeff Page, recently about personality tests. We talked about the Myers Briggs test. It's that test where you see if you're an Introvert or Extrovert, Thinker or Feeler, etc. And when you find out they express those traits in letters sets like E-T-N-J, I-S-F-P, etc. After sharing our Myers Briggs initials Jeff quipped, 'But let's be honest, some days every one of us is a J-E-R-K.' Isn't that true?

Kidding aside, we must be careful not to overlook or underestimate the possibility or even proclivity of our own apathy, insensitivity and perhaps even cruelty.

In England, in the early 1900s, there was once a question put out in the newspaper for readers to write in and respond to this question:

“What's wrong with the world today?” And the great Christian writer G.K. Chesterton wrote in and simply said: “Dear sir, I am.” Interesting response, isn't it? But because this really is such a crucial and serious issue please allow me to put a finer point on this.

To truly grow in humility and in relationship with God and others we need to walk in reality. And the reality is, given the right conditions I could do what Peter did, and I too could actually write those ugly tweets as that professor and producer did.

In 1973 Russian writer and Christian, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote a book called, *The Gulag Archipelago*. It was an account of the Soviet prison system based on his research and his own experiences as a prisoner in the Gulag system.

Part of what he realized through his own personal suffering and torture is that the reality of human evil is complex. He realized given the right conditions he too could have been the Torturer and not just the Tortured, the Victimizer, not just the Victim.

Please excuse this rather lengthy quote, but it is a profound one and I think it speaks wisdom to our current social climate:

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either - but right through

EVERY human heart...If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them, but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being...” (Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn)

In a day of identity politics and extreme partisanship, these are very challenging, sober, and wise words. We are a culture who has come to vilify a lot of people, haven't we?

Part of his point here, I think, is this, our impulse to judge and blame others, or a particular group or class or gender or religion for all that is messed up in the world needs to be shaped and restrained by the sober reality of our own weaknesses and short-comings, as well as our very real proclivity toward moral failure and sin.

Think about this, how different would have the outcome of the scene in Mark 14 been, and the events that followed, if these men had paused a moment, took in what Jesus said, and reflected on their own proclivity to be weak, to be cowardly, to run?

What if they said, “Wow, I know as much as I love following You, Jesus, I know I'm capable of desertion. I know that there is in me, at least to some degree, the capacity to desert You. How Lord, can I not become the one who deserts You? What might have been the outcome of that night?

Let me just say before I move on, Peter eventually got it right. So right that he eventually wrote in his own letters many years after the incidents of Mark 14. *1 Peter 5:5-6: “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time...”*

Isn't that exactly what eventually happened to Peter? Jesus eventually lifted him back up in due time. I can't help but wonder how much of the wisdom of these verses started to be forged on that fateful night from that intense conversation in Mark 14?

This may all feel pretty heavy duty and deep today, but I go here because as we see in the life and actions of Peter, Christian zeal is not enough to bring about God's best in the world, viz. The mark. It's not enough partly because personal, communal, societal sins and problems often have very complex answers. They are often complicated and difficult to change and resolve. Blasting out denigrating tweets or Facebook rants is unlikely to help very much - it may even make things worse.

This is part of the reason why zeal without knowledge, without wisdom, is not enough, because it will require humble wisdom to wade through the complexities and hit the mark, God's mark for a broken world.

Now let me end with this, I think the biggest part of this intense scene in Mark 14 is where Jesus fills it with grace and hope. Even as Jesus is predicting the impending failure of these guys, He is also communicating grace to them. In Mark 14. Jesus says to them, *“You will all become deserters...”* Then He offers this very important ‘But.’ Verse 28: *“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”*

Do you see what is happening there? He is saying even though you will abandon Me, I will not abandon you. After you guys blow it I will meet up with you again to continue this work. Your failure will not mean you won’t have a future with Me. Is that encouraging?

So here in microcosm is a big part of the gospel message. Though we are arrogant, foolish, untamed sinners Jesus continues to love us and if we would but humble ourselves and give our selves fully to Him we too will have a new kind of future with Him, not only in Heaven but here on Earth as well.

Just think of the amazing ministry Peter continued to have for some three decades after the resurrection. Think of the lives he changed, the miracles he performed, and the souls he helped save for all eternity.

And so as you leave here today I want you to be reassured that your failure, however epic, is not the last word over you. His faithfulness to you is. Our failure does not mean we won’t have a future with Jesus. That’s what the

death and resurrection of Jesus does, it gives a future where there has been failure. Not because our love is so strong and consistent for Him, but because His love is so strong and unwavering for us. That is some good news.

As we conclude reflect for a moment, are you hitting the mark, God’s mark in your walk, in your words, in your attitude toward others? Does your zeal have enough room for those who fail to live as God intended? Guys like Peter or even guys like me?

And finally, if you came here today feeling like your failures are unredeemable, unforgivable, or reprehensible can you bring those failures to Jesus this morning so you can find His grace and mercy for your as the disciples found it for theirs?

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com