



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Faithfulness, Failure And Forgiveness
A Meditation by the Rev. Wilma Jakobsen
April 10, 2009 - Good Friday

For much of the twenty-four-or-so years between my decision to follow Jesus and my most significant conversion experience to date, I struggled to make the Christian ideal real. Because I thought I was converted, I blamed myself for the discrepancy between what I was and what I thought I should be.

Now I think this discrepancy was based on mission creep. Jesus' main mission is to lead me to the end of my false self. I understood something of that, but my main mission was to be more like Jesus. These are different enough goals to have kept Jesus and me at odds for years without my knowing it. I'm glad I made certain efforts to improve, but I mistakenly saw my efforts as evidence of conversion instead of as preparation for it.

Jesus is also at odds with his apostle Peter over the same mission conflict. Three years into following Jesus, Peter is still trying to show himself worthy of Jesus: you know, cutting off a soldier's ear, swearing his undying allegiance, etc. And the hypocrisy of it: Peter says he'll follow Jesus to the end, but he denies Jesus only a few hours later. The cool thing is that Peter's willingness to find out just how strong he was brings him to the end of himself.

Just before Peter's spectacular flame-out, Jesus tells him this:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned again ["converted," the KJV has it], strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:31-32, NNAS)

When he first meets Jesus, Peter gives up everything to follow him, but Luke suggests that most of Peter's conversion doesn't take place until about three years later. I think the keys to Christianity are elusive to most Christians: concepts such as "the kingdom of God" and "Christ in you," God in you. I believe conversion is misunderstood because we assume we understand the kingdom of God as well as Christ in us. We assume we understand the birth analogy in the Gospel of John and in two of the epistles. There's another way to look at this birth analogy. If we refer to the stages the New Testament uses in this analogy, perhaps Peter receives Jesus' seed when Jesus first calls him; perhaps Peter labors with child when he betrays Jesus; and perhaps Peter is born again around the time of Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps Christ is in Peter the whole time, but, for Peter's first three years in the Bible, "Christ in him" is only a growing seed. The difference between receiving Jesus (a seed analogy, recall) and being converted may be the difference between being a potential child of God and a functioning one. "To as

many as received [Jesus], to them gave he power to become the sons of God.” (John 1:12) For at least twenty-four years I was becoming, all the while taking myself as the genuine article. I wasn’t very childlike at all. (Childish, yes – and still am.) (Of course, these child metaphors get difficult. In one sense, we’re all God’s children. In another, Paul assigns sonship to "all who are being led by the Spirit of God." (Romans 8:14) Consistent with an underlying premise in Jesus’ prodigal son story (and in *King Lear*), there are daughters and sons, and then there are daughters and sons.)

Peter is still a sinner after this conversion. (Luke’s own book of Acts and Paul’s letter to the Galatians point this out; Paul even points out Peter’s continued hypocrisy.) But there is far more evidence of a new person after this conversion experience than there is during Peter’s first three years of following Jesus. After Peter denies Jesus, he finally is capable of being weak and befuddled. Soon after his resurrection, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him more than the other disciples do. (Like any good mentor, Jesus can’t resist piling on when it suits him.) In response, Peter is far more circumspect on this issue than he has been up to his public denial of Jesus.

Peter has come to the end of himself, and he finds that God loves him anyway. I think that’s why our crises can be gifts. Our crises are sometimes opportunities to strip off more of our false selves and to receive God’s love at a deeper level than our false selves are often unwittingly defending.

My trying to live up to something wasn’t all bad, at least when I wasn’t judging someone to make myself feel better. (Peter also found judging others to be an important strategy in following Jesus: he enjoyed comparing himself favorably to his fellow disciples.) My efforts to live up to who I thought I should be actually prepared me for some conversion, if only because my failures in that regard helped me to come closer to the end of myself. (I’d add to my hypocrisy if I now claimed to have reached the nadir of my false self.)

Paul figures that trying to follow the Bible’s laws plays an important role in someone’s conversion. He says, probably with a wry smile, “The law is a schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ.” I need to study, to pray, to try to love -- to try and fail. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster puts it this way: “The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.”

Conversion is an unmerited gift given over time. It’s a life based on weakness and favor alone. Conversion is the child in me that sometimes sees things I miss as an adult. (“Unless you are converted, and become as children...”)

Conversion means I no longer have to be better than others. It means that what I call Christianity doesn’t have to be better than other religions. Now that I’m a little more converted, I meet people of other religious faiths or with little religious background who are more converted than I am. Who cares? I’m weak – that’s the whole point.

Conversion is the darkness that helps me see and the child that guides me. I hope for more of it. I don't date it ("I was converted on such-and-such a date") and I don't push it ("Are you converted?"). That would be like date-stamping and selling love. Conversion, in the sense I believe the Bible uses the term, isn't a decision to accept the tenets of a religion. Instead, conversion may be a gradually increasing ability to receive love.

One of the great Christians of the twentieth century was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was martyred by the Nazis just before the end of WWII. He apparently went to his death rather calmly. Yet it was not always so. In a poem entitled "Who am I," he acknowledged his struggles and doubts.

Who am I?
Who am I? They often tell me I step from my cell's confinement,
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country house.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
or am only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage.

Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Or is there something in me still
like a beaten army fleeing in disorder
from victory already achieved?

An old man sat along a beach watching the sun come up. He found himself coming here often. The morning sun warmed his bones and it was a good place to pray. It reminded him of his younger years when he was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. He recalled that it was along the shore that he had first met Jesus. He recalled the time when Jesus told him to cast his net out one more time after he and the others had fished all night without success. He remembered being awestruck at the fish the hauled in. They nearly broke their nets. Once more he found himself shaking his head in wonder. Just then, his mood was shattered by the crowing of a rooster. He shivered. His blood ran cold. What a horrendous sound! It was like touching the scar of an old wound. It had long since healed but the mark remained. It made him relive the worst night of his life.

But the rooster's crowing made him relive that terrible night. Looking back, he could not believe how he had denied Jesus, especially after he had declared his loyalty so vehemently. It wasn't as if he hadn't been warned. Jesus had looked him in the eye and said, "Peter, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." He had protested, "Lord, I am willing to go to prison and even to death for you."

Then there was the horrible scene in the garden. He had watched helplessly as the soldiers had dragged Jesus away. He wanted to follow, but he dared not. Then one of the other disciples motioned him to follow him. They went to the house of the high priest and

the guard let them in. He tried to be inconspicuous, but first that servant girl said, "I know you, you're one of his followers." He vehemently denied it, but the damage was done. Someone else looked at him in the firelight and said, knowingly, "You were with him too." Again, Peter fiercely denied it, "I don't know him."

He knew it was time to leave, but before he could, someone else pointed at him, saying, "You're a Galilean; you've got a Galilean accent." Peter yelled loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I don't know what you are talking about." That may have been enough to silence every one, but just then that rooster crowed. Even worse, Jesus turned and at looked at him. Peter melted like a snowball on a July sidewalk. He ran from the courtyard, weeping like a child. He had done the very thing Jesus had said he would.

How had it happened? Peter thought he was strong. He had lived by his wits and by his fists if it became necessary. Now all of that failed him. Perhaps you have been there in the courtyard with Peter. If you are crossbound, someone will ask you, "Are you one of his disciples? Do you really believe Jesus is the son of God?" I recall a night after a wedding when I found myself in the courtyard. One of the bride's uncles had a grudge against preachers. After his third Scotch, he began making hostile remarks to me because I was a preacher. Like Peter I discovered that the courtyard can be a very uncomfortable place.

Peter found that he was not prepared to be in the courtyard. Jesus had warned him and the other disciples, not once but twice. He had told him that he would deny that he even knew him. Then in the Garden, he told them, "Watch and pray, that you do not enter into temptation. Do you ever wonder how Jesus did what he did? How had he withstood temptation? How had he withstood the mistreatment he received during his trial or the beating or the crown of thorns? How had he refused to run away, knowing what awaited him at the cross? There are a number of answers to these questions, but one of them is that he prepared himself, but one of them is that he prepared himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a horrible time for him as he prayed that he not have to drink to cup, but he came to the place where he could say, "Not my will, but yours be done." My sense is that we don't spend nearly enough time preparing ourselves to face temptation or to face the probing questions that come in the courtyard. We think we only have to show up and everything will be fine. Jesus understood in a way that we do not, that it is not just a matter of living by our wits. He knew that being crossbound means that you must prepare yourself. Being crossbound means more than coming to church and singing songs and repeating words. Jesus was ready to answer the questions that came to him: "If you are the Christ, tell us." and "Are you the Son of God?" He knew that answering those questions affirmatively was to sign his own death warrant. But Jesus knew who he was.

Peter's challenge and ours is to get ready to walk into that courtyard. The courtyard is a halfway house between being crossbound and denying that we know Jesus. Or better, it is the halfway house between courage and cowardice. Ultimately Peter denied knowing Jesus. No, no, you have the wrong person. I am not a disciple. I don't know him. It is a case of mistaken identity.

Indeed it is a case of mistaken identity. Peter said, “I don’t know him.” It was a case of mistaken identity in another way. Peter didn’t know Jesus because he did not know himself. Had you asked Peter if he would deny knowing Jesus, he would have been insulted. What do you mean? Deny Jesus? Absolutely not! Peter underestimated the challenge of the courtyard.

The real question of identity is not only who Jesus is, but who we are. Our culture wants to know, inquiring minds want to know, are you a disciple of Jesus? In this series of sermons, Pastor Chip has asked some provocative questions. Are we crossbound? Recently many of you read The Disciple-Making Church. In it Glenn McDonald raises the question of how well we are doing in helping believers become disciples. He poses a series of questions that we could use as a measuring stick to see how we are doing. We could call it a crossbound test. Which of these statements are more crossbound?

I often let the Bible inform my understanding and some of my choices.

OR

I study the Bible passionately and allow it to shape my choices and my life.

I love the people who love me and who do not cost me much to love.

OR

Because God loves me unconditionally, I am seeking to become someone who loves others in the same way, even the ones who are hard to love.

I am reluctant to share my faith because I am afraid I will say the wrong thing or I won’t be able to answer their questions.

OR

I find that when I share my heart, people listen respectfully even if I am not very skilled or articulate in the way that I say it.

If these questions make you uncomfortable, I understand. They make me uncomfortable. They cause me look deeply into my own heart, and I don’t like what I find there. I identify with Peter. He failed for the same reason I fail. He waited until he was in the courtyard before he began studying for the exam.

I suspect that many of us are unaware of the changes in our world during the last hundred years with respect to Christianity. At the beginning of the twentieth century 70% of Christians lived in the western hemisphere. Now, 70% live outside the west. I grew up

in world that gave Christians the home field advantage. To be an American was to be a Christian—for good or ill. Yet that is not necessarily the case today. Our culture tolerates Christianity but does not necessarily embrace it.

Peter failed the test of the courtyard miserably. I wonder if there is anyone here who has never failed in the courtyard. My friend and colleague in ministry, the Reverend Roane Deckert told me of the time when he was in China working alongside a young woman who was his translator. At some point she spoke about her search for the meaning of life. He so badly wanted to tell her about Jesus, but he did not. Those moments have a way of replaying themselves in your head. Another person sent me an email in which she said that her way of denying Jesus happens when she finds herself in a stressful situation. Instead of praying and asking God to help her, she says she turns to junk food and turns inward. I know exactly what she is saying. Jesus was ready to go into the courtyard because he had first spent time in the garden. If we want to survive the courtyard we must also spend time in the garden.

How do you respond to your failure in the courtyard? When you could speak up, but do not? The good news is that Jesus does not forsake us when we fail. You may remember that Jesus looked at Peter just when he had denied him for the third time. What was in that look? Perhaps there was a touch of “I tried to warn you, Peter.” I think there was something else in his eyes—a look of compassion. Even in his own pain, Jesus was so crossbound that he took a moment to show his love to Peter. Jesus may have corrected Peter, but he did not reject him. He understood that failure is just another step in the journey of learning to confession.

Jesus warned Peter of what lay ahead of him. He said something equally significantly to Peter, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.” What a wonderful thought! Jesus is praying for you. Jesus not only does not reject us, he prays for us. He does not give up on us because we fail from time to time. This is borne out by the lives of great Christians. If you read their lives, you find that they did not always get it right.

One of the great Christians of the twentieth century was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was martyred by the Nazis just before the end of WWII. He apparently went to his death rather calmly. Yet it was not always so. In a poem entitled “Who am I,” he acknowledged his struggles and doubts.

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Or think about Mother Teresa, who gave her life serving the poor. In a spiritual biography she acknowledged how she felt that Christ has not responded to her the way she had expected. Somehow she expected from Jesus some tangible and sensory experience of Christ, but it did not come. Only after she accepted this as a parallel to Jesus' own cry of forsakenness did she find peace.

For Peter his failure in the courtyard was not the end of the story. I found myself reading his instructions to the Christians about sharing their faith in his first letter had a slightly different spin for me this time. Hear it again:

But in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope, that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.

Revere Christ as Lord. . . . With gentleness and respect . . . Peter seems to have learned the lesson of the courtyard. You see, when we take time to reverence Christ as Lord, we realize it is not about us. We only present the opportunity for them to learn about Jesus. We say to them, "Consider Jesus." Remember, that you are not alone in the courtyard. Jesus is there too. He knows what it is like and he knows what to do.

Let us return to Peter in Rome for a minute. He struggled with what to do. According to a story that comes out of the third century Peter listened to those who told him to leave Rome. So the story goes, he left under cover of darkness. As he walked along the Appian Way, he saw a figure come towards him. As the man drew near, there was something familiar about him. When they met, Peter realized it was Jesus. He asked, "Quo Vadis, Dominique?" Where are you going, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "I am going to Rome to be crucified, since you will not."

When he heard that Peter turned around and followed his Lord back into the city where he was crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same way that Jesus had been.

Quo Vadis, Dominique? Where are you going, Lord?" No, the real question is, Quo Vadis?" Where are you, going? To be crossbound is to follow Jesus? So, where are you going?

On Good Friday in 1987 I was in the Nevada Desert at the underground nuclear bomb-testing plant near Las Vegas. This was back in the days when the InterFaith Center to Reverse the Nuclear Arms Race was based here at All Saints Church. I was in the desert with a group of All Saints parishioners and many other people who were

participating in the Lenten protest against nuclear weapons. Every Friday in Lent a group of people went to the site to protest, and every week some people would be arrested for trespassing. This being Good Friday, there was a dramatized Stations of the Cross in which we all followed and became part of the action. It was one of many experiences during my three years as parishioner at this church that transformed my life on a number of levels. One of those involved a simple stone. At the beginning of the Stations of the Cross, we were all asked to pick up a stone and put it in our pockets. I did that, and promptly forgot for most of the time that it was there. We followed the dramatic “Stations” around the perimeter of the bomb testing site. I was engrossed in the action – horrified when someone threw a cup of water at the wooden cross carried by a monk in a brown cassock, agonized by the descriptions of suffering of the aftermath of nuclear bomb blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and litanies of continued suffering around the world. I related with South African empathy on land issues to the Native American leader who told how the land around us had once belonged to their tribal people.

By the end of the Stations of the Cross, as those to be arrested moved towards the line of police at the place where they would be trespassing, I felt an enormous anger welling up inside me. I was angry about all that I had heard, angry at the litany of injustices and suffering, angry about the injustice taking place in South Africa at that turbulent time, angry enough to think about the stone in my pocket and what I might do with it. In one very sobering moment, with my hand around the stone, I realized that I was entirely capable of taking that stone and throwing it, using it in violence, in violent protest, in violent action. It was as if I had experienced the unthinkable. In that one moment I realized that I was capable of doing something I would have told you that I would never do in my lifetime. My sense of self was cracked open that Good Friday. An illusion about who I thought I was, shattered. I experienced a moment of truth, a moment of awareness that changed my understanding of myself and of human beings. I prayed that day. I prayed that God would forgive my self-righteousness, would help me understand. Now as I reflect on that experience I think I discovered that day what it is to be human and was able in a small way to embrace my humanity more fully. There were many other things that happened that weekend which led to my journey to ordination, but that’s another story for another time.

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What about Peter? I believe that on the night when he followed the action into the courtyard, he unwittingly stepped into a moment of truth about himself which shattered all self-illusion. Now Peter is one of my favorite disciples precisely because he is so very human. Annoying maybe, because he is always so eager, so enthusiastic. He was so passionate, so impulsive and so unthinking, so unaware. Prone to dramatic outbursts of faith which proved to be impossible to keep. Such a hero, such a failure, but such a large heart. Yet so afraid. We have so many snapshots of Peter throughout the gospels. Peter, like the others, left everything he had to follow Jesus. He had moments of insight, when

he answered Jesus' question, "Who do people say I am?" with his declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, (Mark 8:29), the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16), whereupon Jesus conferred upon him the gift of leadership. Yet this was followed immediately by moments of total nonunderstanding when Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about his upcoming suffering and death. Peter had moments of courage, when he saw Jesus walking on the water and started walking on the water towards him, yet moments of terror as his courage failed him and he started to sink in the waves. Peter a few hours before this moment in the courtyard, has passionately told Jesus, "you will NEVER wash my feet", flip-flopped a second later to say "not just my feet then but my hands and head as well" – he still did not understand what Jesus was doing. Peter also passionately declared his undying commitment to Jesus those few hours earlier: "I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:39) "I am ready to go with you to prison, even to death!" (Luke 22:33), "Even though I must die with you, I will never deny you." (Mk 14:31, Matt 26:35). So what is Peter thinking when he says "I am not one of Jesus' disciples" and according to the other gospel writers, cursed and said "I do not know the man". Peter is not ready to acknowledge that he knows Jesus, let alone go to prison with him or die for him. Maybe Peter had a plan. Maybe his thought was simply pragmatic, denying he knew Jesus in order to get inside and maybe even thinking of staging a dramatic rescue. But three times over? Peter was busted when the cock crowed. Way, way too late he remembered the last thing Jesus had said also a few hours earlier "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." The other gospels record that Peter wept bitterly. The hero is shattered. By his faithlessness in the face of danger and exposure, the possibility of arrest, and his unthinking lies in attempting to keep his allegiance to Jesus secret and save his own skin. Denied his Lord. Faithless love. The inimitably oh-so-human, so-like-us Peter discovers his true humanity in all of the worst of whom he is and would have never wished to be. That which was an unthinkable impossibility for him, became embodied within him in the series of unthinking denials that unraveled his faith and his sense of self faster than the cock could crow.

What a contrast this is with that of Jesus' interaction with the high priest a few verses earlier in the reading. When questioned about his disciples and his teaching, Jesus says "I have always taught openly...I have said nothing in secret" and when struck on the face for his attitude, Jesus speaks truth to power with courage: "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Jesus spoke truth in all that he did, throughout his ministry. Jesus spoke truth to power when he confronted the religious leaders and challenged their way of thinking, their pious yet empty spirituality, their lack of care for others. Jesus spoke truth to individuals and they responded with faith and commitment. The woman at the well, his challenge to Martha, the list of conversations is long. I believe it is because Jesus was fully human, the epitome of humanity in all its glory and freedom, that he was able to speak truth as he did. He knew who he was, he was secure in his identity as the Son of God, he was affirmed by the love God had for him, he knew the

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journey of suffering that lay ahead and knew and trusted where he was going. Jesus knew that Peter would deny him three times and gently, with irony, told that to Peter when Peter declared undying commitment. Jesus knew that about Peter AND Jesus loved Peter. No judgment for this, as we see later in the Gospel. Only undying love, or rather, love which would choose to suffer, to endure torture and to die on a cross for feeble, frail, “now we’ll follow you, oh no we won’t because we’ll suffer” humanity. Maybe just maybe, it was only when Peter knew the depths of his failure, the capacity he had to deny the one he loved and followed, when he hit rock-bottom that he was able to recognize his own helplessness, his complete powerlessness to carry out his ideals, his vulnerability. Because of that he could later truly know the love of Jesus poured out for him and lavished on him in bestowing leadership and trust despite his monumental failure. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul?”

So what about us? Are we not so much like Peter? Wanting with hearts full of faith to follow Jesus wherever he leads, and then falling on our faces with shame because a few moments later we have acted like we forgot the plot and never knew Jesus. Whether for pragmatism, expediency or for a moment’s sensual pleasure, or whether to avoid the consequences of suffering or discomfort or save our own skin or shift the blame, we do it all the time. Embracing our humanity surely means realizing that we are the best of who we can be and we are also the worst. In our failures and worst moments, do we confront a Christ who judges us, that illusion we hold so strongly, or can we hold on to a broken and suffering Christ on a cross and know that Christ’s love reaches way beyond our worst failures, way beyond our most shattered dreams and finds us in our helplessness, sits with us, binds our wounds and restores us in love and wholeness. Knowing that we are capable of doing the unthinkable, that which we said we would never do, can set us free to embrace our humanity more fully, because God knows all of whom we are, the worst of what we are capable, accepts us as we are and nonetheless loves us infinitely and beyond—forever. What wondrous love is this, O my soul. Good Friday certainly reminds us of that. This is the day to embrace our humanity, to realize that we are all capable of secrets and lies because of the illusion that we will save ourselves. This is a day to hear the challenge that Jesus offers, to speak truth to each other and truth to power. There is certainly great need for that in our world, in this nation, in this church, in our communities, our relationships and to ourselves. When we live with secrets and lies the consequences are most often toxic and destructive. The power of courageous truth telling can open an impossible situation to the possibility of redemption and transformation. Who knows what would have happened that night if Peter had said, “Yes I am one of Jesus’ disciples, I know him?”

This is a day to remind ourselves that there is no room for self-righteousness in this world. This day reminds us that we are all like Peter, experiencing the worst of ourselves in an unthinking moment or series of impulsive actions and responses. This day reminds us that we are all equally in need of God’s love, grace and mercy. We are all embraced by God in all of our humanity, all of the good, all of the bad, and loved, loved,

loved and loved. Is that not what it is to embrace our humanity – to know that we are loved by God no matter what and to freely accept and receive the love that is offered, no strings attached, no possibility of earning that love, no conditions, nothing to be done. Simply to receive the unconditional love which

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Jesus offers, the gift of his life, his suffering, his death in order to give us new life and love forever.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul.

Prayers:

O Christ, forgive our failures, our denials, our betrayals...

Forgive our holding on to illusions that you judge our failures and the goals we fail to reach.

Help us to know, Lord, that when we fail or fall,

There is no falling beyond the boundaries of your presence and love.

In our failures, in our pain and vulnerability,

Continue to come to us, help us to see you and to hear you

Be with us in our devastations and restore us to wholeness

As we embrace our humanity

Through the love and agony of your Cross.

Amen.