

The Third Week of Lent • March 18, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 26:69-75

"The Wound of Denial"

There's a practice in some circles that's known as shunning. To shun someone is to reject them, to refuse to acknowledge them, even if they were to come right up to you. We don't hear that word used very much these days, and when we do, it's often speaking of the practice of religious groups or certain close communities. When someone in the group acts in a way that does not conform to the standards and norms of the larger community, that individual might be shunned – denied by the rest. Other members of the group would not speak to or interact with the shunned person, effectively making the recipient of the shunning invisible. As comedian Stephen Colbert might put it, the community would in effect be saying, "You are dead to me!" Generally speaking, though, the community does not shun someone out of malice. Shunning is usually an act of reproach, seeking to correct the attitude or behavior of the shunned so that they might turn around and come back to the larger community. But this practice of shunning also serves the additional function of protecting the shun-ers: they limit their exposure to what they perceive as being unacceptable or dangerous.

Our reading today continues the narrative of Jesus' Passion. We hear of Simon Peter and his actions following Jesus' betrayal and arrest in the garden when, only a short while ago, Peter drew a sword, seeking to protect his Teacher. Peter was brave at first. Indeed, he followed the crowd that had captured Jesus – albeit at a distance – even coming inside the courtyard of the home of the high priest. Peter wasn't like the rest of those disciples who just up and ran! But after being brave at first – again, from a distance – Peter starts to feel threatened. When recognized as one of Jesus' followers, Peter shuns Jesus, who has done *nothing* wrong, seeking to protect himself from the same forces which even now are mocking and beating his Teacher just a stone's throw away. And every time someone confronts Peter, his denial of Jesus becomes that much more vehement. At first, he brushes off a servant girl, saying, "I do not know what you mean." The second time, he ratchets it up and dismisses Jesus with an oath – the modern equivalent of which might be, "I swear to God that I do not know the man." Finally, Peter even invoked a curse on himself as if he were saying, "May God strike me dead if I am lying!" But notice what is happening here, which is even more telling than Peter's words: he is distancing himself from Jesus – literally! Peter moves from the inner courtyard towards the gate, then from there to the entrance itself. And finally, once Peter remembers Jesus' prediction and how he has just now fulfilled it, he goes out completely. The denial and the distance become greater each time Peter is confronted and threatened. To protect *himself*, Peter shuns his Teacher.

We've probably all heard people cursing, using the name and title of Jesus Christ in a decidedly unsanctified manner. But we didn't speak up, didn't ask for others to change their language. Or when a colleague was seeking direction in life, we remained silent, passing on the opportunity to speak clearly to the love that Jesus has shown us. Or when we sat down to eat lunch at a restaurant with friends and didn't take the time to fold our hands and thank the Lord for His gifts before eating. **We've shunned Jesus, too, and for the same reasons as Peter: to avoid being shunned, denied by others.** Our silence and inaction are just as much a denial of Jesus as Peter's words and actions at the chief priest's house. Shunning Jesus, we strike our Lord with the wound of denial. Jesus takes this wound of denial and carries it to the cross. And there, the perfect Son of God is shunned by His Father for you and for me: **Jesus becomes the outcast for us.**

But that's not the end. Jesus does not say, "You are dead to me," because we have shunned him. Following the resurrection, Jesus came to Peter to forgive him. What's more, the Holy Spirit emboldened Peter to acknowledge and proclaim Jesus as Lord before *thousands* of people, as we read in the book of Acts. By God's great grace, we too share in the forgiveness that Peter received, and in this Lenten season, we too can be silent no longer.

Amen.