10.2.2022 Trinity 16 (Ephesians 3:13-21; Luke 7:11-17)

One Tuesday in March, 1858, 5,000 men were packed into the YMCA hall in Philadelphia. They listened to a young preacher, Dudley Tyng, preach on the text, 'You that are men… serve the Lord'. The stirring sermon made a permanent impression on these men, and 1,000 were converted that day, but that powerful sermon was Tyng's last. A few days later, a tragic farm accident resulted in his right arm being amputated, and he never recovered from this severe shock. When he realized he was dying, he said to his father, 'Stand up for Jesus, father, stand up for Jesus. And tell my brethren of the ministry, wherever you meet them, to stand up for Jesus!' The following Sunday, Tyng's friend and fellow-minster, George Duffield, read out in church the hymn which he had written, based on his friend's last sermon and dying message: Stand up for Jesus.

From the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus' disciples have often struggled to stand up for Him. Perhaps the most well-known example of that truth is found in Peter's denial of Jesus shortly before our Lord's crucifixion. Peter was the disciple who so boldly said to Jesus, *"Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will"* (Mark 14:29 NLT). No doubt this heartfelt declaration came from Peter's great love and affection for our Lord, nevertheless, just hours after speaking those words, Peter found himself doing what he swore he would never do.

As Jesus was being falsely accused, beaten, and insulted (Mark 14:57-65), Peter remained at a distance, warming himself by a fire in the courtyard of the high priest. It was there that fear and human weakness overtook him, and when he was accused three times of *"being with Jesus,"* of being *"one of them"* (Mark 14:66-70), three times Peter denied our Lord. St. Mark tells us that when Peter was confronted a third time, *"he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know this Man of whom you speak!'"* (Mark 14:71).

Our Savior remained steadfast and faithful through the excruciating pain and unimaginable suffering of His Passion and Death, but Peter failed to stand up for Jesus by denying the One who loved him perfectly. Holy Scripture describes Peter's failure, but I doubt any of us will judge him too harshly, because we know how often we've failed to stand up for Jesus, in far less challenging circumstances. We know what it's like to love our Lord, but to fearfully follow Him from a distance instead of walking by His side. How often, when our culture puts Jesus on trial, have we sat quietly warming

ourselves by the fire instead of boldly standing with Him in the midst of insult and accusation.

From the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus' disciples have often struggled to stand up for Him. Peter denied Him. Judas betrayed Him. They *all* scattered when He was arrested (Matthew 26:56), and we are all too aware of the many ways we've failed, in thought, word, and deed, to stand up for Jesus. The truth that He died for us, yet we often fail to live for Him, is a heartbreaking and very difficult fact to confront, but before we fall into despair, let's continue to look at the example of St. Peter, because as you know his story did not end in failure.

On the night Peter denied our Lord, Jesus said to him, *"I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me"* (Luke 22:34). In St. Luke's Gospel account we learn that immediately following Peter's third denial *"the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word that the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly"* (Luke 22:60-62).

We know from the words of Holy Scripture that St. Peter was far from perfect. He argued with the other disciples about which one of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). After Jesus commanded him to watch and pray (Matthew 26:36-46), he fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane while our Lord prayed so fervently that *"His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground"* (Luke 22:44). At one time, Jesus even said to Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"* (Matthew 16:23).

Yes, St. Peter was far from perfect, but his greatest failure came on that night by the fire, when fear and human weakness overtook him and he denied our Lord, and at the very moment of his greatest failure, this passage we read tells us that *"the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter."* Can you imagine that moment? Try to put yourself in Peter's shoes for just a minute. We've all made countless mistakes, but if you dare, consider your greatest failure, and then in your mind's eye, picture Jesus turning to look at you at that very moment.

What do you see in His eyes? Anger, judgement, condemnation; or do you see mercy that's new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23), the steadfast, sacrificial love of God reaching out from the Cross (1 John 4:9-10), divine

forgiveness casting each and every confessed failure into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19). It's important to ask ourselves this question of what we see in the eyes of Jesus when we fail, because the answer clearly reveals what we think about God, and according to theologian A.W. Tozer, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

We must get this right, and so we turn again to the *"living and active"* (Hebrews 4:12) word of God for the answer, and rely on the Spirit of God to guide us into all the truth (John 16:13). The Bible reveals to us that what came into the mind of Peter when our Lord *turned and looked* at him in that moment of complete failure didn't cause Peter to run in fear, or to hide in shame like Adam and Eve in the Garden. Instead, what Peter saw in Jesus' eyes led him to shed tears of heartfelt, sorrowful repentance. What came into his mind when he saw Jesus didn't push him further away, but actively reached out to draw him near. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans, it is *"the kindness of God"* that leads us to repentance. (Romans 2:4).

What Peter saw in Jesus' eyes wasn't anger, judgement, or condemnation, it was compassion, the same Divine compassion you'll remember our Lord pouring out upon the group of outcast lepers we talked about two weeks ago. The Gospel passage we read that day told us *"when He saw them"* (Luke 17:14), Jesus spoke the Word that cleansed and healed these men. When Jesus *turned and looked* at them, His compassionate word gave them back their life, and in the Gospel passage this morning we recognize Jesus working in the same way.

Today we read about our Lord approaching the gate of a city called Nain, where *"He saw a dead man being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow… and <u>when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her</u>, and said to her, Weep not"* (Luke 7:12-13). Jesus saw this grieving widow and mother, He saw the outcast lepers, He turned and looked at Peter, and each look was one of compassion, compassion that leads to healing. Jesus healed the widow's heart by raising her son from the dead. He healed the heart of the lepers by delivering them from their illness and restoring them to their home with the people of God. He healed Peter's heart with a compassionate gaze that called him to a place of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

These passages provide us with clear, historical evidence that in suffering, sorrow, and death, in fear, failure, and weakness, our Lord and our God (John 20:28) doesn't look on us with anger, judgement, or condemnation, but with

Divine compassion. In the same way the Lord looked at Peter, the lepers, and the grieving mother in their day, he looks upon us today, and though we may tremble at the thought of Jesus turning and looking at us in our worst moment, consider the comfort that is actually found in that truth.

The truth is: His steady, intent look of compassion serves as evidence that God, even in the midst of our greatest failure, does not turn His back on us. In our darkest hour, when we feel farthest from Him, we don't need to go searching for God, all we need to do is open our eyes, and we will find He has been there all along, looking upon us, inviting us to place our trust in Him, to draw near to Him, to stand up for Jesus once again.