

“Be Careful What You Promise”

Matthew 26:31-35

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I was about ten years old and went fishing with a neighbor that was retired. As we sat on the pier, I reached into his tackle box to borrow a set of pliers. When I finished with them, I did not put them back in the tackle box but laid them on the pier next to me. Twice he mentioned that I needed to put them in the tackle box and both times I told him they were safe. I would be careful and not knock them into the water.

No sooner had those words left my mouth than I turned quickly and heard something hit the water. I watched helplessly as the pliers disappeared into the murky water.

He was very gracious and did not scold me, but come to think of it, he never took me fishing again, either.

You can imagine how guilty I felt that afternoon. Watching those pliers fall to a watery grave, I thought of his warning and my denial that his concern was valid. How foolish of me!

I wonder if Jesus' words, as well as his own, were ringing in Peter's ears the night he denied the Lord. I suspect they were which added to his guilt and shame. Listen to the dialogue between Jesus and Peter on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane that fateful night.

“Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. But, after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.’

Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ Peter declared, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’ And all the other disciples said the same” Matthew 26:31-35.

One thing is certain. Jesus and Peter spoke clearly and there was no doubt what either thought. Both expressed it well.

Jesus knew he was soon to be on his own with no support from his friends. All his disciples would desert him when he needed them most.

Peter, on the other hand, was certain he would accompany Jesus all the way to the cross, even if no one else did. Twice he emphasized this. “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”

Say what you will about Peter; he did not lack for confidence. I am convinced he meant what he said because he loved and appreciated Jesus so much. He was willing to die for Jesus until he got the chance.

What happened? Why did he do as Jesus predicted and deny his Lord three times before dawn? Why did he act cowardly when a lowly maiden, of all people, challenged him? I think a case could be made for the fact that Peter underestimated the power of temptation and overestimated his abilities. This was a lethal combination and still is. Every promise made among friends will be tested in a hostile environment. Peter discovered this rather quickly and so will we.

Some of the most dangerous words we utter are, “I would never do that.” Once you say them, you will get the chance to find out how strong or weak you are and it probably won't take long. Peter's test came within hours of his boast and he flunked it. I'm not surprised, though. Anytime a person denies his or her humanity and vulnerability, a fall is inevitable. It is just a matter of time.

I think there is another reason Peter let Jesus down. He wasn't a good listener. Jesus told him what was going to happen, yet he was unwilling to hear it and less willing to believe it. He was too eager to talk, discounting what Jesus said.

I wonder what Peter would have done that night had he replied to Jesus' harsh prediction of his denial by asking, “Lord, tell me why you believe this. What do you know that I don't? What do you see that I am overlooking? How can I avoid making the biggest mistake of my life?”

Have you ever asked anyone these questions? This story pleads with us to do it and Lent provides the opportunity.

I think this story, which is not the least bit flattering to Peter, is here to teach us that Lent is a time for asking questions and seeking honest answers. That's hard for overconfident people to do or those afraid of truth. It is unnatural for those whose minds are closed and whose curiosity is limited. It is difficult for people always on the go.

In his book, The Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes that in our contemporary society, our adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness," he will rest satisfied. As psychiatrist Carl Jung once remarked, "Hurry is not of the devil; it is the devil!"

I have a friend that says that listening is one of the least understood and developed areas of human nature. Stephen Covey, author of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People would heartily agree with him. Covey writes, "Communication is the most important skill in life. Consider this, though. You've spent years learning how to read, write and speak, but what about listening? What training or education have you had that enables you to listen?"

He has a point, doesn't he? Listening is not valued highly in our talk radio world where there is no shortage of people eager to tell others what they think. Reading, writing and speaking are taught in public and private schools, and rightly so, but how many classes are offered in listening? "Seek first to understand, then to be understood," writes Covey. This requires the fine art of listening and Lent gives us this opportunity.

Lent is a time for listening. It is a time for subduing egos and becoming humble. It is a time for seeking others' advice. It is a time for suspending a given understanding long enough to be open for the search for truth.

Lent is a time for thinking about commitments and promises and those depending upon you to be faithful. It is a time for feeling the pain your unfaithfulness will inflict upon others. It is a time for relying upon God's grace to help you resist temptation and rise to challenges. And it all begins with listening.

"My own eyes are not enough for me," wrote C.S. Lewis. "I must see through those of others."

I wonder this morning what others see in your future that you are unable or unwilling to see? A mature and responsible person will find out. There is too much at stake not to and he or she knows it. No one wants to go weeping bitterly into the night burdened by guilt and shame like Peter did, and by God's grace, we don't have to do this.

Who could you ask? Who has your interest at heart that you could trust? Turn to anyone that loves you, a parent, your mate, a teacher, a coach or a friend. Perhaps they are trying to reach you but you are ignoring them. Wonder what you are missing and what difference it will make?

Do you recall the offertory that was beautifully played a few moments ago, "Be Thou My Vision?"

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day and by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word;
I ever with Thee, and Thou with me, Lord.
Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son,
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Let God help you see what you cannot. Ask Him to reveal what He sees in your future so you will be aware of the risks. Ask Him to give you insight and understanding so you can make enlightened decisions. Ask Him to show you where the road leads that you are traveling so you can make necessary changes. Ask Him for the grace you need to be a better listener. Ask Him to help you put the pliers back in the tackle box. Like any wise and loving parent, He has experience and wants to help you. Why not ask Him now?

