

Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2026

John 18:12-27

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

People who study the history of the gospels are reasonably certain that the gospel of John was the last one to be written. Some scholars place the date of composition as late as 90-100 CE. That means that it was composed about 70 years after Jesus ascended to heaven. Stories can evolve over time. Knowing that a story changes over time does not imply that the story is untrue or unimportant. Far from it: we believe that the Scriptures were inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The author of John tells us at the very end of the gospel, John 21:24-25 **"This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.** 25 But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." The gospel is written to provide a witness's account of Jesus, his life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. It was written to describe God's relationship with people as God's Son Jesus lived here on earth. As the disciple who was one of several witnesses matured he came to understand ever more deeply the broad vision of God and God's purpose for sending Jesus to live on earth: which he attempted to describe in his gospel.

Additionally, none of the gospels were EVER intended to be absolute factual accounts of exactly what Jesus did and said. The gospels were written as a testimony about God at work in the world; about Jesus, as God's son at work in the world, and to help all of the people who didn't experience Jesus' actions and teaching personally to come to believe in Jesus.

This helps to explain why the synoptic gospels tell the story of Peter's denial differently than the gospel according to John.

With this opening commentary, we turn now to the Scripture reading for today. Unlike the telling of this story in the synoptic gospels, this gospel describes it differently. Peter does not deny Jesus as John tells it. No, what Peter does is deny that he is a *follower* of Jesus. And there's a difference. The synoptic gospels quote Peter as saying, "I do not know him." But each time Peter is questioned in the gospel of John he is asked if he is a follower (or a

disciple) of Jesus. And in two instances when Peter is quoted directly he says, "I am not." In other words, "I am not a follower of Jesus. I am not one of his disciples." Interestingly, the "I am not" phrase uses the *ego eimi* phrase that Jesus has been using over and over in this gospel. Except that it is an explicit negative. In other words Peter is vigorously affirming that he is NOT a disciple. He is saying, "No, I am absolutely NOT a follower of Jesus." (Pause)

I am now going to introduce you to the phrase: *moral injury*. Eventually I will pull together Peter's denial and make an argument that Peter experiences *moral injury* as a result of his denial.

What is "moral injury?" Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay and colleagues coined the term moral injury to describe experiences where someone who holds legitimate authority has betrayed what is morally right in a high-stakes situation. This was especially true in times of war.

So what is a real world example of moral injury?

One example occurs when soldiers are ordered to "take no prisoners" and to kill everyone perceived to be an enemy; even if the enemy is surrendering. One might say that one lingering effect of the My Lai massacre was moral injury-the soldiers were ordered to fire upon a tiny village of women, children, and the elderly. It was wrong, some would say murder, and resulted in moral injury for the soldiers involved. The soldiers had sworn an oath and been trained to obey the orders of their commander without question. If they had not done so they would have faced court martial for insubordination. The commander held legitimate authority and betrayed what was morally right in what was perceived to be a high stakes situation. The moral injury occurred within and to the soldiers.

Now, I'm going to return to Peter. Peter says in John 13:37, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Peter is stating that he will follow Jesus anywhere and everywhere; going so far as to say, "I will sacrifice my life" on your behalf. The claim that Peter makes indicates his commitment to following Jesus. But when Peter is questioned by various people as he stands outside in the courtyard, he denies that he is a follower of Jesus.

It's tempting to come up with reasons for why Peter speaks the way that he does. What is important in this scene is that under the

pressure of questioning Peter denies that he is a disciple. Now, how does this example demonstrate moral injury?

Moral injury in this example occurs when one discovers that what you have fervently avowed you will do, or fervently avowed that you believe about yourself suddenly becomes impossible to adhere to or abide by. Peter avowed he would lay down his life for Jesus and follow him anywhere. But when it came right down to it—he turned away from that path. It's not always about making a difficult choice. Sometimes it occurs when your life circumstances change quickly and you are unable to react in a manner that is consistent with who you believe yourself to be.

And that's part of the lesson that comes out of the Scripture reading for today. We Minnesotans have been experiencing a lot of unusual life circumstances over the last few months. We may have thought we knew who we were and how we would act under certain circumstances. But to be candid, the events of the last few months were well beyond most of our imaginations. As a result, we too, may have said one thing and acted in the opposite manner.

The fallout for us personally is that we have to deal with the inner turmoil that we feel. We have to assess or reassess our self-definition. We are forced to come to grips with the realization that we may be surprised at how we react and that we might not react as bravely and impetuously as we thought we would. As we come to grips with these realizations emotions will bubble up: there will probably be anger, there will almost certainly be some shame involved and all of these emotions will hurt.

Now, you will say, Pastor, you've not talked about Jesus. Isn't that what the sermon is supposed to be about? Yes. Today's Scripture reading goes back and forth between scenes with Peter and scenes with Jesus in front of Annas. We are witness to Peter's denial. We are also witness to Jesus' words as he defends himself in front of Annas. Bottom line: Jesus does not retract anything that he has said. Jesus stands boldly in front of Annas and challenges him to go and ask those who had followed him, those who had listened to his teachings, those who had witnessed the signs (the healings and other miracles) and ask them if he (Jesus) was teaching blasphemy. The short answer is that Annas didn't have a legally religiously justifiable case against Jesus. There are no witnesses standing there in front of him testifying against Jesus. And Jesus knows it. Jesus knows that there is no case against him. Jesus knows that the charges are false. And yet Jesus allows the events that were set in motion during his arrest in the garden to proceed.

The Bible was written to describe the relationship between God and people. It uses stories, poetry, wisdom sayings, and parables to help us understand God and God's deep commitment to humanity. Each author (and especially the authors of the four gospels) wrote as they did in an attempt to describe the relationship because Jesus turned the entire Old Testament system upside down. The rabbis and religious leaders thought they understood God and God's relationship with humanity. But Jesus came and lived among us because the relationship was misunderstood. The relationship was not one of punishment and retribution. The relationship was grounded in love. As abusive and painful as the crucifixion event is going to prove to be, Jesus continues to move toward the cross out of a deep and profound expression of God's love for us. God looks at the world differently. God doesn't see the world as a transactional place. God acts out of a vast and nearly unimaginable love for all of humanity. Remember: John 3:16-17 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." God acts out of love. God acts with salvation for all peoples in mind.

That salvation was intended for humans 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. That love was expressed to people 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. Salvation is still intended for all people in and through the person of Jesus. God's love is still expressed to people in the person of Jesus today and every day. As we move ever closer to Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross keep in mind that it was done for us and for our salvation. Jesus' crucifixion and death were done as the ultimate action of a God who loves us; who loves you. Amen.