

**Sermon: “Denial Ain’t Just a River in Egypt”****Scripture: Matthew 26:69-75****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 29, 2026**

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“Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt,” Mark Twain supposedly quipped. No, it’s that very common human tendency, that none of us are free from, where instead of facing a reality that’s unpleasant, painful, hard or unpleasant about ourselves, we deny it. Sometimes we are conscious of our denial as an outright lie to protect or promote ourselves but more often it’s an unconscious psychological mechanism that does its work of the distortion of reality behind the scenes so we don’t even recognize it as false. It’s almost like we fall asleep to reality, to the truth of the matter, and have no motivation to awaken from that dream.

It was as prevalent a human condition in the ancient Mediterranean world as it is in 21st century America. Jesus was often confronting people on their hypocrisy and denial, trying to wake them up to the truth and it made him an enemy of most of them. The men in their righteous indignation go to stone a woman accused of adultery and Jesus instead of judging her says to them, “you who are without sin may cast the first stone.” They hang their heads and walk away. Another time he teaches without mincing words - “try getting the log out of your own eye before you go removing the splinter in another’s.” And it’s our great capacity to be in denial of our own shadows, our own spots of blindness, that has Jesus saying - “you know what, just stop judging others altogether lest you be judged, for how you judge others will be the judgement leveled against you.”

Peter was beyond certain, absolutely convinced, that he was committed to his teacher and Lord and would do and be anything for Jesus. His first denial even before he got to the courtyard was of his own capacity to place himself before everyone else, "I will never desert you". Jesus, never one to mince words or hedge on the truth to keep things comfortable replies: "Not only will you desert me, Peter, but you'll do it three times tonight before the cock crows." Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. And ain reading the story we too know what Jesus knows cause we've already seen Peter fail Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane by falling asleep, so when you hear blustery Peter and his indomitable confidence in himself despite it all, you kind of cringe, "Oh boy, Peter, not sure you want to say that" and it's like watching a train wreck of a situation that we cannot pull our eyes away from... partly because we are so clear that it could be us saying that.

And sure enough, when Jesus is arrested Peter denies him not just once but 3 times. Peter is asked if he is one of Jesus' followers and 3 times he says "nope!" The Gospel of Matthew has him saying - "I don't even know the man" three times to his accusers and in the Gospel of John has him saying "I Am Not!" three times, contrasting to Jesus' "I Am" statements - Before Abraham was, I am. I am the bread of life. I am the great shepherd. I am the vine. Peter says "I Am Not."

What happens here with Peter is the counter to Jesus' teaching that to find our lives we must lose them. Peter in his desperation to preserve his life, loses it by denying his life - I am not. We too are tempted to define ourselves primarily by what we are not, over and against others, in the negative. Who are we unless we are not that and not them and not those. Peter was called by Jesus into an identity of self that was not over and

against anything or anyone else, not over and against Rome, not over and against Judaism, not over and against the rich not over and against women, not over and against sinners, but simply a self that was of worth and value because that self was a person created and beloved of God. That's the essential identity marker that no longer pits us against anyone else but has us accepting that same identity marker for everyone around us as well.

Peter had been coming to know himself in previous years in relation to the life-giver Jesus Christ and felt awakened to His life, more than he ever had before, being now defined by this God-man of grace and love. But to save his own life, his own skin, in his own estimation, he makes the exact opposite move and denies the one who gave him life, the very ground of his being. His I Am, becomes an I Am Not. And it is all happening so unconsciously, even after Jesus tells him this is exactly what will happen, after doing that 3 times, then the cock crows and he wakes up to the horror of what he has done and it breaks his heart. He goes off and weeps bitterly, is how the Gospel of Mark tells it.

The passion story that accompanies us through Holy Week leading up to the joy of Easter, is the story of all the forces that begin to align themselves over and against Jesus, the author of life: the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman authorities, the crowds in Jerusalem, even his closest disciples. One by painful one we watch them deny the embodiment of love, the author of life, the Great I Am, to preserve themselves and define themselves over and against him. He is not. I am not. We are not. But the Great I Am refuses to let himself be defined over and against them but receives their judgment, their violence, their denial, their rejection of him...

and he returns only love, forgiveness and love. Jesus' response to their denial of him? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

How often do we "know not" what we do, the damage we cause, how hypocritical we can be, how the devils out there that we judge are merely a reflection of the devils within. It's ok... I mean, not "ok" but it's just so human, we so often "know not what we do". But there's something to acknowledging it, keeping it in mind, remembering that we can as easily be the crucifier as the crucified and that can grant us some needed humility which can lead us to be gentler on the people around us who also barely know what they do.

The passion story of Jesus' suffering and execution and desertion at the hands of criminals and the powerful and the deniers is referred to as the greatest story ever told because through it we are awakened from our sleep to the deep recesses of what it means to be human, that we are limited, frail, sinful, broken, fighting a tough battle in life and so is everyone else around us. Jesus' goal and call for us above all else was compassion, humility and compassion. And the story of Jesus' passion, death and eventual resurrection, which we'll celebrate next week, is a story about about the victory of compassion, in the end, in the face of everything in the world that encourages us towards the opposite - apathy, greed, pride, callousness, hatred - in the end, love wins. And we ask as the famous 18th century anglican clergyman, Charles Wesley asked "how can it be? how can it be? That He emptied himself and died for me?"

That is the question that awakens the denying sleeping heart...how can it be?