

“Our Worst Moments”

John 18:12-27

The passage today in John 18 is a portrait of “worst moments.” Most of us hope that our worst are never recorded. We hope there are no pictures, no audio, no video; we hope that people will forget when we were at our worst. But here, on the pages of scripture, in the crucial hours of Jesus’ life, we find a panorama of worst moments. After the Last Supper, Jesus spent hours praying for his disciples. When he had finished, they went out across the Kidron Valley – a valley just to the East of Jerusalem, filled with caves and rock tombs -- to a garden that Jesus loved.

Judas also knew this garden, and he had determined to betray Jesus and that night he would be arrested. As Jesus and his disciples gathered in the garden, Judas led a band of soldiers and guards from temple, carrying lanterns and torches and weapons to arrest Jesus. It was Judas’ worst moment. He had been a disciple of Jesus; Jesus had called him a friend. He had washed his feet in the upper room before dinner. Judas and Jesus had had disagreements, but he was Jesus’ friend. Now, Judas betrays his friend into the hands of those who want to dispose of him. He leads them to the place. His worst moment. No less a worst moment for the soldiers and guards who came to arrest him. The guards had been sent to arrest Jesus once before, and they did not do it. They returned and told the leaders and priests that they had never heard a man speak like this before. There was something in his words, in the truth of what he said, in the light that radiated from him, that they could not arrest him. But now, they had come to do it. They had come to arrest the Son of God. It was their worst moment.

But for no one was this moment as painful, as shameful, as it was for Peter. He was one of the Lord’s inner circle, one of the three that were closest to Jesus. There in the garden, Peter shows us his typical bravado and bravery. When the guards reach to arrest Jesus, Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of one of the servants from the Temple. Nowhere else in the Gospels does one of Jesus disciples do physical violence to another person, but Peter seizes the moment. And Jesus rebukes him, saying, “*Should I not drink the cup the Father has given to me?*” Jesus was not surprised, or out of control of these events. He knew this was his destiny and his Father’s will, and he accepted it. So he went with the guards.

Peter followed behind with the disciple that Jesus loved, and when they arrived at the home of the high priest, the one whom Jesus loved went with him into the courtyard while Peter waited at the gate. It was cold outside, and they had a fire in the courtyard. So the other disciple spoke to the woman who guarded the gate so that Peter could be welcomed in. The woman, who was guarding the gate, asked such a simple question. “You’re not one of his disciples too, are you?” The answer was obvious, Peter had come with them to the house. But Peter, for no other reason than he was afraid, said *no*. While Jesus was bound and questioned in the house, one of his closest friend denied knowing him. Peter drew close to the group and warmed himself by the fire, and they asked him again, you’re not one of his disciples too are

you? Again he said, I am not. Finally, a relative of the man whose ear he had cut off, said, “Didn’t I see you in the garden?” And Peter denied it. You know the old saying, if you’re going to tell a lie you better stick to it. Peter did, though everyone there knew he was lying. All his old courage evaporated; all his professions of faithfulness withered. While his Lord was being questioned, Peter denied knowing him. It was his worst moment.

Thankfully, our worst moments are rarely immortalized and remembered for generations. But every one of us has moments we would rather forget; moments we wish we could take back; things we wish we could do over. Every one of us has times when we have betrayed the Lord, fallen short of his love, his grace, and his truth. Even when we knew better, even when we wanted to do better; we did not. What is so striking to me about Peter’s worst moment is that it seems so inexplicable. Just moments before he had been so courageous, and now standing in a courtyard around a fire he does what he promised he would *never* do. He denies even knowing the Lord. Then again, the truth is many of our worst moments are inexplicable, at least in the moment. Someone who loves us presses in that moment: why did you do it? I just want to understand. Tell me, why? And the best we can utter is something like, “I don’t know why.” It’s part of the shame of a worst moment – you realize you’re not in control of yourself. What you wanted to do isn’t what you did. You wanted to be your best, you wanted to live up to your ideal, you wanted to be faithful to God’s love and grace in your life, you wanted to live as Christ lives. But you didn’t. All of us have worst moments.

But the largest truth in this passage is not the worst moments of these people; if we focus there we will miss the gospel. The larger truth is revealed in Jesus’ words and actions: God is faithful to us, even when we are not faithful to God. What Jesus does in this story is such a powerful contrast to the others; his strength is contrasted with their weakness; his majesty with their humility; his finest hour with their worst moment. When the guards come to arrest him, Jesus does not hide or cringe. He steps out in front and says, “Who are you looking for?” They reply, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He answered, very simply – I am. The same name God gave to Moses to tell Pharaoh, Jesus gives these guards, “I am.” They shrunk back, stunned. And the Lord asked again, “Who are you looking for?” They said, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He replied, “I told you I am he.” Then, to care for those with him, he said if it’s me you want, arrest me and let the others go. So they bound him and took him to see Annas at the high priest’s house. The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching, and he did not shrink back, or equivocate, or hesitate. “I have spoken openly and done nothing in secret. If you want to know, ask those who heard me.” A guard hit him in the face for being rude. Jesus looked at him with dignity and said, “If I am wrong, tell me I how I am wrong. But if I am right, why did you hit me?”

Jesus was strong, honest, courageous, and faithful. And he continued to be – before Pilate, before the crowds, all the way to the cross. He was faithful to Judas; faithful to Peter; faithful to the guards; faithful to the priests; faithful to you and me; faithful to all, those who love him and those who betray him. He came for us, he came to love us to the end – and he

does. We may be able to hide our worst moments from the world, but we cannot hide them from the Lord. Yet he is faithful to us; to the one who stumbles, to the one who falls, to the one who makes a mess of their life; to then one who denies his love and grace – he remains faithful still. Thanks be to God – God never gives up on us! Even in our worst moments, God never gives up!

And that is why we can never give up – not on ourselves, and not on others. The worst moments in life tempt us to give up hope. When we experience our worst moments, we are tempted to say, this is what it is, this is who I am, I'm a mess and I'll just give up. But God does not give up on us. God continues to reach out to us in love, God continues to draw us into new life, God continues to hold out forgiveness and a fresh start. God never quits. And because of that there is always hope: hope for us, hope for all.

This is the life that God wants to live in you, a life that is able to stand with someone in their worst moment and continue to love them and hold out hope to them. This is if the love that God wants to show through you; love that reaches out to a person when they have failed themselves and God and offers them a hope, forgiveness, and new life. Our worst moments are not recorded on the pages of history, but in close relationships we know each other's worst moments. You and I will be present with some people when they hit their worst, when they betray themselves, their friends, and God. When we refuse to give up on someone in their worst moment, the life of God lives in us. When continue to be faithful to them at their worst, the love of God lives through us.

This story is not really about worst moments; it is really about the determined faithfulness and love of Jesus Christ. That is what our lives are really about. Life is ultimately not about the failures, the fallings, the worst moments that mark our story. Thank God, our lives ultimately about God's love and grace of God that is always reaching our, always faithful, and never gives up.

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