

**Stuck in Fear©****Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75****April 7, 2019****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

As you know, Fred and I just recently moved to an apartment in Williamston, where my daughter lives, in preparation for my retirement. Our apartment is lovely, although we are adjusting to a much smaller space than we are used to. From our living room window, or our balcony, we look out at the Red Cedar River. Pretty sweet!

We had lots of help from many of you – packing, loading, unloading, unpacking and – thankfully, someone else driving the 26-foot U-Haul truck I rented. I planned on driving it but the closer the day came to moving, the more nervous I began to feel about it. So, I asked Tom if he would drive the truck and he graciously said yes. That night, after getting everything unloaded, Tom went back to Holly with someone. Later, I realized I needed to get gas for the truck and take it down the street to the U-Haul place there in Williamston.

No big deal. It was just a few blocks. I knew I could drive it that far. So my daughter, Annie, went to pick up a pizza. Jim was out in front of the apartment building waiting to follow me. And I was in back with the truck.

Trying to maneuver it around the narrow curve of the drive to get it out of the back-parking area. Problem was, it was very narrow. Very tight. And did I mention it was a 26-foot truck? That was also very tall? As in high? High enough to scrape and bend a piece of the awning of the carport it was parked beside? Long enough that I couldn't figure out how to get it through the narrow curve without scraping the sides of the truck against the building? Or running into the fence that was on the other side?

After scraping the awning, I backed up and then tried again. And again. And again.

The more I failed at figuring it out, the more nervous I became. I was stuck. Stuck between a rock and hard place. Stuck in fear actually. I was sure I would end up damaging the truck, the apartment building, tearing down the fence as well. Or I'd never get out. The more nervous I became, the more fearful I became and I began to feel truly stuck. Kind of panicky stuck. Kind of like I couldn't move. Didn't dare move or it would get worse.

So, I called for help and it took two people directing me for about 20 minutes to get me unstuck. I was shaking by the time I was out and very relieved to turn in that monster.

Of course, my experience of getting stuck in fear is more humorous and light and doesn't really compare to Peter's experience of being stuck in fear. But, in a small way, I know that fear can make us feel weak, can unnerve us, can shake our confidence and cause us to want to run away from the situation or, at our best, call for help.

Our story today from Matthew is again from the Lenten Bible study we are doing as we learn about discipleship from the leading disciple of Jesus – Simon Peter. Simon, whom Jesus named Peter (Petros, Cephas) – the Rock whom Jesus built his church on. Peter – strong, passionate, bold, outspoken, committed, flawed but faithful.

Jesus and his disciples are in the Upper Room in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus sees that no one has washed their own feet, which was the custom and they certainly have not offered to wash each other's feet.

Jesus overheard them arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest – the closest to Jesus once he, the long-awaited Messiah, took over as king and established a new kingdom where he was ruler. That's what they expected from the promised Messiah. He would be someone like the beloved king David – a warrior king.

Of course, in Jesus style, he turns things around as usual. Get this picture in your minds: Jesus, the Son of God, soon to be beaten, spit on, cursed at, on trial which was nothing but a mockery, got up and wrapped a towel around his waist, got on his knees like a servant and began – one by one – washing the disciples' feet.

And he tells them if you want to be great, you must be like a servant – you must serve one another. A true leader is a servant leader – someone who serves those he is leading, showing love and a willingness to do for them what he would ask them to do for others. That is a sign of real greatness.

And Jesus tells them that he would be a suffering servant; he would soon be arrested and would suffer and die, but would be resurrected. Of course, they stopped hearing once the disciples heard that he would die. They could not hear or understand that he would not stay dead. And we talked about that last week, about how Peter rebuked Jesus for saying he would die. He couldn't imagine that happening.

But now, Jesus tells them something else, something very disturbing. He says that every one of them would desert him that night. And Peter ... Peter is absolutely confident that, even though all the others might desert him, he never will.

And Jesus tells Peter that before the rooster crows in the early morning hours, Peter will have denied knowing Jesus three times. Peter doesn't believe it. He is confident that he would not do that. Not him. Not ever.

But we know what fear can do, don't we? Being stuck in fear can shake our confidence and cause us to do things we thought we'd never do.

After the Passover Meal, after Judas left knowing he would betray Jesus, and after Jesus gave the new meal – the Supper that he commanded all his believers to do to remember him by – he took them to the Mount of Olives where they had been staying. He asked them to pray for him – to stay awake and pray. He took Peter, James and John a little further with him and asked them to pray.

And Jesus went further and it was there where he prayed and grieved and the Scriptures tell us he was so distraught that he sweat drops of blood. He asked God to take this horrible thing that was about to happen away if possible. Jesus was almost stuck in fear himself. Almost. But he then said to the Father, whatever is your will, I will do.

It was that night when Judas came with the Roman soldiers and the religious leaders. It was there where Judas kissed Jesus to confirm that he was the one they were wanting to arrest. And it was Peter, perhaps determined to stand with Jesus and prove his dedication to Jesus, Peter who

had a sword even though it was against the law for a Jewish person to carry a sword, Peter, in an attempt to protect Jesus, raised up the sword and wacked off the ear of a soldier's servant.

That was pretty brave. Peter could have been killed on the spot. But Jesus took that ear and reached up and healed the servant. Attached the ear back. He told Peter to put the sword away. "All those who live by the sword will die by the sword," he said.

He told the guards he was the one they wanted – to let the others go. And every one of his disciples, stuck in fear, fled. Ran away as fast and far as they could. And just guess who was running with them. Yes. It was Simon Peter.

Jesus was left alone with those who wanted him killed. Jesus had been deserted just as he foretold.

But Peter, along with John, did not go far. They came back and followed where Jesus was being taken. Hiding in the darkness, but were there watching to see what was going to happen. Jesus was thrown in a cell – probably an old cistern in the house of the high priest until they could gather the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council – who would give him a trial. A mockery of a trial. Not a real, legitimate trial. And, of course, he was found guilty. Guilty of treason. Of lying about being the Son of God. Blasphemy.

And Peter? Well, he was brave enough to enter into the courtyard where the guards were warming up around the fire. People who had been there when Jesus was arrested.

A servant woman who had quite possibly been there when Jesus was arrested spoke up. "You were there with Jesus!"

And Peter denied it. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. And he left that spot and went over by the gate. But others saw him and another woman said to the crowd, "This man was with Jesus, the man from Nazareth."

And Peter, once again, denied it. "I don't know the man!" he told them.

The countdown has begun.

Another hour passes. Peter is sitting by the fire and again, someone – a man this time – approaches him and asks if it was Peter in the garden with Jesus.

At this point, Peter breaks. He comes unglued. He was stuck in fear. He starts cursing and swearing that he does not know Jesus.

One.

Two.

Three times.

And the cock crowed.

And Peter went away into the dark dawn and wept bitterly.

He got stuck in fear and he did the very thing he promised he would never do. Fear can shake you; can paralyze you; fear can change your resolve, can squelch your confidence. And that happened to Peter, even though he was so sure of himself and his commitment to Jesus.

We can imagine how bitter, how full of remorse he felt in that moment. Surely he believed that Jesus would be so disappointed in him. Jesus would die being alone and believing Peter was no better than any of the rest. Peter, the one Jesus had said he would use to build his church. Yea. Some Rock he turned out to be.

Have you ever said or done something that hurt someone? Something you regret saying or doing but you couldn't change; you wished you could take it back? Wished with all your heart that it never happened?

Did you feel certain the pain – the severed relationship – could never be mended?

I'm imagining Peter felt that way; hopeless and in grief at what he had done.

But, oh the sweetness and relief there is in forgiveness! When we are forgiven and given a second chance, it is the most wonderful, grace filled moment. To know we are loved in spite of our failure; in spite of the disappointment and pain we caused.

And while we are jumping on ahead with this good news, we know that Jesus did seek out Peter after he was resurrected. Jesus did forgive Peter and certainly used him – flaws and all – to build the church. And Peter used this story – this shameful story of his failure – to tell others that even in our flawed, weak humanness, Jesus loves us, forgives us and uses – yes! – even us.

He is the Christ, the God of second chances (and third and fourth and even 50<sup>th</sup> chances. The God of grace and love. We learn to be the servant leaders with Christ, and as forgiven people we are humble and able to serve with humility and love as Jesus served us.

We all get stuck in fear sometimes. But never let it hold you in place; or intimidate you to the point of running and hiding from God. Shake it off!

You are his child, his beloved, and you are among those who are called to be the church – serving others with the same love and grace that Jesus serves us with.

Like Simon Peter, we are disciples of Jesus – flawed but faithful. Amen.