



LESSONS IN LIVING

“The Cost of Denial”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Babs Miller
March 8, 2026

Scripture Reading: Mark 14: 26b-31; 66-72 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

As they were walking Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for scripture says, ‘I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I have been raised, I will go to Galilee ahead of you.” Peter said to Jesus, “Even though everyone may fall away, I will not.” Jesus said to him, “The truth is, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But Peter said vehemently, “Even if I have to die with you, I will not disown you!” All the other disciples said the same thing.

While Peter was down in the courtyard, one of the attendants of the high priest came along. When she noticed Peter seated near the fire, she looked more closely at him and said, “You too were with Jesus of Nazareth.” Peter said, “I don't know what you're talking about! What do you mean?” Then Peter went out into the gateway. At that moment a rooster crowed. The woman, keeping an eye on him, started again to tell the bystanders, “He's one of them.” Once again Peter denied it. A little later the bystanders said to him once more, “You are certainly one of them! You're a Galilean, aren't you?” Peter began to curse, and swore, “I don't even know who you're talking about!” The cock crowed a second time. And Peter recalled the prediction Jesus had made: “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” He rushed away, weeping.

Sermon

All four gospels have a version of this story. I chose Mark's gospel because it is widely believed to be the first version written down approximately 60 years after these events were reported to have occurred. The other gospels are believed to have based their story on his. The story is depicted on one of the lithographs on the wall to my left. You can probably make out the rooster real easily.

Because of my years involved in 12 step programs, I really wanted to name this sermon “*Denial is more than a river in Egypt*”. [laughter] One of the big mainstays of these programs is to recognize the denial we have lived with in order to maintain our own or other's additions and the total chaos of our lives. I remember those years fondly now, because they changed my life for the better and ultimately got me to seminary after many years of trying to deny my calling.

And so, I love Peter! He is a fellow traveler on that “river” of denial. I find that the practice of denial does not go away for some of us. Apparently, Peter recognized his denial thanks to a

rooster. I don't have that rooster in my life, but I try to be very aware of all the times I go into denial mode. It often happens in casual conversations with people I don't even know. Some statement is made that my response should have sounded like "Well as a lesbian I..." .

But I don't say that, because of my own internalized homophobia that assumes that this person will react negatively if they know that about me. Many people just live in a cis-gendered world so deeply that even their casual conversations assume that everyone else lives in that same world.

So, for those of us who don't live in that world, we are frequently challenged to move out of denial, but our internalized fears may take over. It may not seem a big deal, but not expressing who we are does takes its toll on us. And being a lesbian is not the only area where my denial kicks in.

Sometimes my denial seems well called for, but other times it is totally unnecessary, and yet I do it anyway. At least today I try to apologize for the times I fall back into denial when I can. I, like many of us, am still a work in progress.

Peter's denial hit him very hard. He had told Jesus earlier that he would *die* rather than to deny him. But fear got the best of him. When he finally realized that he had done exactly what Jesus said he would, he broke into tears of recognition of his denial.

That seems to have been a major wake up call for him because he ultimately became known as the first Bishop (or Pope as they later were called) of the Roman Catholic Church.

Fear is a common enemy of all of us today. Our country is so out of control and to speak out against what is happening could have very negative consequences. The powers that be count on us being intimidated into submission. But I think we all can see the similarities between what is happening here and what happened in Nazi Germany about 90 years ago. Our current administration even makes the connection for us if we somehow missed it.

For me, this brought me back to *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* of 1934 which is part of our *Book Of Confessions in the Presbyterian Church, USA*. Reading the history of how and why that document was developed and what happened with it after that was very revealing to me. In April of 1933 the so called "German Christians" closed their meeting by adopting the following statement:

God has created me a German. Germanism is a gift of God. God wants me to fight for my Germany. Military service is in no sense a violation of Christian conscience, but is obedience to God....For a German, the church is the fellowship of believers who are obligated to fight for a Christian Germany. The goal of the 'Faith Movement of German Christians' is an evangelical German Reich Church.

As I delved further into the history of this document, one individual stood out for me. Martin Neimoller, a Lutheran pastor, had been an infamous U-boat commander in World War I. After the war he studied theology, and became a Lutheran pastor and served a church in Berlin. He initially was a supporter of Hitler because he too was against the Jews in Germany.

But when Hitler took over control of the church and tied it to the Reich, Neimoller became a strong activist against Hitler. He was one of the signers of *The Theological Declaration of Barman*. This document separated church and state and put Jesus Christ as its head, not Hitler. Karl Barth, who was a famous theologian of that day and beyond, was the writer of this

document which clearly stated that it was idolatry to lift up Jesus Christ and the state, which in this case was Hitler, and treat them as equals. To pledge complete allegiance to Hitler and the Third Reich was clearly idolatry.

Out of the 137 ministers and laypersons who gathered to develop this document, Neimoller was the only signer of it who went on to publish it and continue to write articles and speak out against Hitler. This got him placed in one of the concentration camps from 1938 to 1945 when the camps were liberated.

He became one of the initiators of the *Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt* of October, 1945 which plainly stated that the churches in Germany did not do enough to resist the Nazi regime and therefore caused great harm to many countries and peoples. This document makes the following statement:

Through us, infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.

Neimoller is credited with the famous personal declaration of guilt that talks about all the groups of people who the Nazis came after, that he was not a part of and so remained silent and ends with “*Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.*”

As I look at today’s news of our President’s desire to be a King and to basically make America a white heterosexual patriarchy once again, I find this hauntingly familiar to the words and deeds of Hitler for many years in Nazi Germany. Hitler was wrong then, and our current leadership is wrong now.

But our current situation is also an expression of the cost of many years and decades of denial on the part of the American people. We chose to ignore all that was happening all around us. We stood by and watched as Texas changed its political allegiance from serving people to serving power. We watched as what we thought was love for everyone turn to hate and horrific violence.

Each time we thought it couldn’t get any worse, and each time it did. We held on to our denial maybe because reality was just too hard to accept.

Are we going to be like Neimoller and end up saying “*when they came after me there was no one left to speak up?*” Or are we going to fight for universal human rights that values all people over power? Will we cower back in hopes that we might “blend in” and survive? Some of us qualify for multiple lists to be eliminated and all of us know that to conform to the current demands is to die inside.

So, will we stand up to power and money and demand that our constitution (which still needs some help), be not only upheld but ratified to be an explicitly, radically inclusive of any and all faith practices and other paths the leads to love, not hate, that leads to inclusive measures that do not lift anyone above their fellow traveler in the journey we call life in our world?

Will we stand by and watch our planet be destroyed by an unquenchable hunger for power and wealth by a few? Or will we lift up the rights of the many who seek a safe sustainable

environment that lifts up all and leaves no person, plant, animal, water source, or food source left behind? Will we become isolationist or universalist? Will we embrace white nationalism or our one human family?

I think it's time we decide whose side we stand on and to speak truth to power. If you have not seen it, I would strongly encourage you to look up the *Christians Against Christian Nationalism* and read and consider signing on to their statement. I will be asking our Session to consider doing just that at our March meeting. Christian Nationalism no more represents Christianity than our politicians in Washington, D.C. represent democracy.

I love what this country and what this flag meant to me when I watched the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington, D.C. stand on the steps of our nation's Supreme Court and sing the National Anthem when marriage rights for everyone was passed. I stood up in my living room, my hand over my heart, with tears streaming down my face, because that day I knew for the very first time in my life that the song was really being sung to include me.

I want to feel that way again and shed those tears again because we have finally become a land for, of and by *all* people, not just a privileged few. That we finally have put people and the earth over power and money. That we put an end to our denial that tells us there is nothing we can do, and instead start looking for things that we *can* do. Just as denial can destroy families, it can destroy nations too. I don't want there to be no one left to speak out when they come for me!

I don't offer you any answers to any of my questions because I think they are questions we each have to answer for ourselves.

In closing I leave you with this quote from Meister Eckhart:

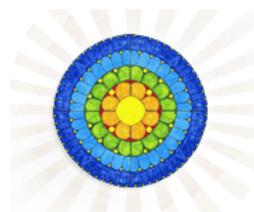
"The price of inaction is far greater than the cost of making a mistake".

I invite you now to take this moment to collect your own thoughts on this message.

Benediction

I'll give you a spoiler alert that what I'm about to say may be a partial answer to all those questions that I just asked in this sermon. Many of you know what I'm about to say. That is that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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