



Sunday, Mar. 11, 2018

JESUS STANDS UP FOR US, EVEN WHEN WE DON'T STAND UP FOR HIM

Pastor Vern Christopherson

JOHN 18:12-27 NRSV

¹²So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." ²²When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" ²³Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" ²⁴Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." ²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.



There's a question that sometimes gets asked by preachers: "If you were on trial for being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" It's one of those questions that can catch us off guard. We hope the answer is yes, but we're not always sure. Sometimes our commitment to Christ is half-hearted at best.

At various times in life, our faith gets put to the test. 1) A man has been praying for his wife who has a debilitating illness. She's being steadily going downhill for the last several months. He prays and prays, but nothing seems to help. He's very discouraged. Deep in his heart, he wonders if he even believes in God anymore. 2) A woman who is married gets up and goes to church every Sunday. But her husband never goes with her. And lately he hasn't been very supportive of her going either. "Why do you waste your time in that place?" he barks, "And why do you waste our money? It's just a bunch of nonsense." This is hard for the woman to hear. Deep in her heart, she wonders if someday she might have to choose between her husband and God. 3) An employee works for a mid-size technology company. He's in human resources. He's noticed that some of the minority employees are being treated unfairly: stricter performance appraisals, lower annual raises, less flexibility with their schedules. These practices don't seem fair, or right, or even legal. They certainly go against the employee's Christian values. Deep in his heart, he feels like he should confront the CEO, but he's afraid of losing his job.

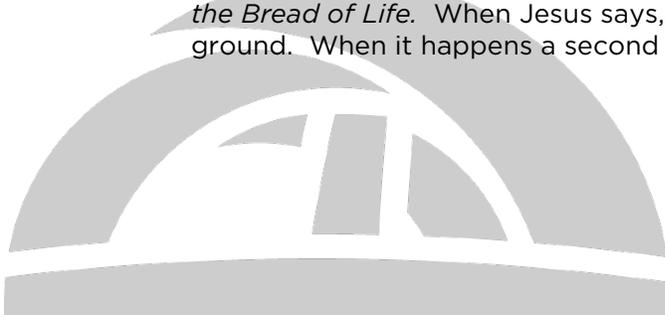
Three stories. There are hundreds more. In big and little ways our faith get put to the test. What do you think: If you were on trial for being follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

There's a trial going on in our reading from John, at least the beginnings of one. A detachment of soldiers, led by Judas, approaches Jesus in the garden. It's nighttime, which in John's Gospel often signals a time of unbelief. The soldiers come with lanterns and torches and weapons. Jesus is arrested and bound. The soldiers take him to the house of Annas, the former high priest.

As the trial unfolds, John tells the story a bit differently than the synoptic gospels. In John, here are no witnesses that speak against Jesus, no questioning of his claims to be the Messiah, no charges of blasphemy. Instead, the interrogation centers on Jesus' disciples and his teachings. Jesus claims that he taught openly in the temple and the synagogues. His teachings have not been subversive. His followers are not a threat to Rome or anyone else.

Notice that woven throughout Jesus' trial is the story of Peter. In fact, much of this trial scene is really about him. Peter and another disciple follow Jesus into the courtyard. That's what disciples do. They follow. At first, Peter is not allowed inside the courtyard. He stands at the gate looking in. It's a critical juncture. The Greek word for *courtyard* can also be translated as *sheepfold*. John is echoing "Good Shepherd" language here. He's saying that some sheep belong to the flock, and are safely inside the fold, but other sheep are on the outside looking in. On this particular night, we wonder if Peter will be part of the flock or not?

As Peter goes through the gate, a maid acting as the gatekeeper asks him, "You're not one of his disciples, are you?" Peter answers firmly, "I am not." Compare Peter's words with those used by Jesus during his arrest. Two different times Jesus asks the soldiers, "Who are you looking for?" They say, "Jesus of Nazareth," to which Jesus replies, "I am he." Jesus' answer hints of the divine name - *I am who I am, I am the Light of the World, I am the Bread of Life*. When Jesus says, "I AM," the soldiers shrink back in fear and fall to the ground. When it happens a second time, Jesus says in effect, "You've got the man you're





looking for. Let my disciples go.” Jesus is fearless in standing up for his followers. He adds the comment: “I did not lose a single one” (18:9).

Peter gets asked a second time, “Aren’t you one of his disciples?” Again Peter firmly denies it, “I am not.” And then a third time Peter is asked the same question, this time by a relative of Malchus, the slave whose ear Peter had cut off with his sword.” And a third time Peter strongly denies it. At that moment the cock crows. Suddenly Peter, the disciple who pledged unfailing loyalty to his master, finds himself outside of the sheepfold. Indeed, Peter has been on trial for being a follower of Jesus, and there’s not enough evidence to convict him.

Peter’s denial of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels. Each of the accounts has Peter’s trial happening at the same time as that of Jesus. But John’s focus is not so much on Peter denying Jesus, but rather on Peter denying that he’s a *disciple* of Jesus. “I am not,” he insists.

Why is this important? Let me remind you of the context of John’s Gospel. John was written some 50 to 60 years after Jesus was gone. Many first-century Jews had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, especially on the basis of the disciples’ testimony. And their numbers were growing.

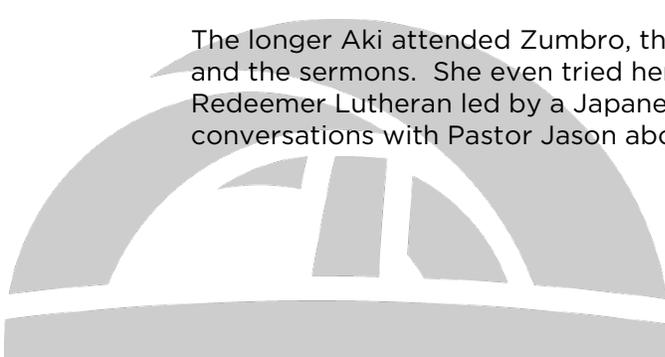
Then one day it all came to a screeching halt. Jewish religious leaders announced that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah was to be expelled from the synagogue. I can imagine the process involving a trial. People were rounded up and interrogated, “Are you a disciple of Jesus? Will you stand up for him?” Suddenly, like Peter in days of old, they were forced to give an account. If they said no, I am not, they could remain in the synagogue. But if they said yes, I am, they would be cast out.

Clearly the cost was steep. The synagogue was the center of faith and life. If you were cast out, then you gave up your place of worship; you lost your friends, your family, your very identity as a child of Abraham and Sarah. You opened yourself up to abuse and scorn at every turn. The fact of the matter is: If you were on trial for being a follower of Jesus, and you said yes, then the authorities had all the evidence they needed to convict you.

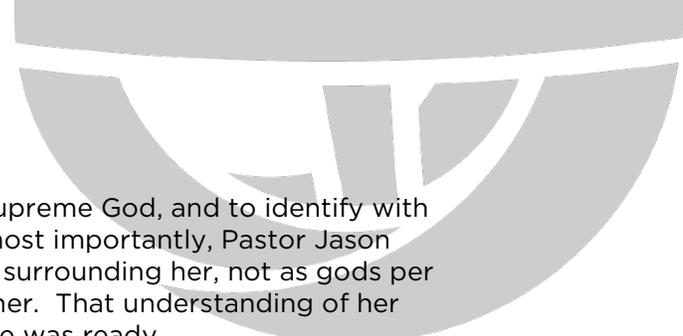
As followers of Jesus, we believe that he stands up for us just as surely he stood up for those disciples that night in the garden. He stands up for us with courage and love. In return, he asks us to stand up for him too. So, let me ask, is that what you’ve been doing with your life lately?

We had a baptism here on Wednesday morning – an adult baptism. Aki Hara, a visiting professor from Osaka, Japan was the one getting baptized. Aki had been attending Zumbro for the last two years. She’d been invited by Sandy Leinonen. Aki was studying transcultural nursing through a program at Augsburg University. She’d been to places like the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the Amish community in Harmony. She wanted to learn how to provide culturally appropriate nursing care in a variety of settings.

Aki felt welcome at Zumbro. When you think about it, it was yet another transcultural experience for her. She had been raised in the Shinto tradition in Japan. She’d grown up with many gods, including trees and fire and water. Her ancestors were a part of that tradition too.



The longer Aki attended Zumbro, the more curious she became. She enjoyed the music and the sermons. She even tried her hand at making lefse. She went to a Bible study at Redeemer Lutheran led by a Japanese-American pastor. She had a number of conversations with Pastor Jason about what it means to be a Christian. Pastor Jason



encouraged her to think of the God of the Bible as one supreme God, and to identify with Jesus as a unique revelation of that God. And perhaps most importantly, Pastor Jason assured her that it was okay to envision her ancestors as surrounding her, not as gods per se, but as spirits who were supporting and encouraging her. That understanding of her ancestors was the final hurdle for Aki. Finally she said she was ready.

Aki's baptism was very much a transcultural experience. She was baptized in English, though her primary language is Japanese. Her sponsors were the Japanese-American pastor and his wife. We sang the Swedish hymn, "Children of the Heavenly Father" accompanied by a ukulele. In the midst of all these cultural variations, we did what we regularly do: we put water on her forehead, prayed for the Holy Spirit to come, and lit a candle to signify the light of Christ coming into her life. We surrounded her with a purple prayer shawl. She was thrilled. She said that purple is her favorite color. We welcomed her into the Lord's family.

It was a great day, but now comes the hard part. Yesterday Aki left to go home to Japan. She's a brand new Christian. She'll be living in a culture with very few Christians. She doesn't know how her family will respond to the news. She might have a hard time finding a church that's as warm and welcoming as Zumbro. As we said our goodbyes, we promised to pray for her. We gave her a devotional book entitled *Jesus Calling*. In turn, Aki said she would keep reading our sermons online. And she said that when we start Live Streaming our worship in the next few weeks, she's going to worship right along with us over the internet. As a new Christian, Aki will be called to stand up for Jesus, even as Jesus stands up for her.

When Jesus said, "I did not lose a single one," he was thinking not only of his immediate disciples in the garden. He was thinking of those down the road threatened with expulsion from the synagogue. He was thinking of that husband struggling over his wife's debilitating illness; that woman whose husband was not at all supportive of her going to church; that HR employee feeling compelled to act on his values. He was thinking of Aki and her newfound faith. He was thinking of you and me, and the big and little tests we face each day.

Let's be honest, standing up for Jesus has never been easy. Sometimes, like Peter, there won't be enough evidence to convict us. Sometimes we're going to fail, and fall. When we do, we need to trust that Jesus will be there to stand up for us, and get us on our feet again, and give us another chance. We need to trust that he will forgive us.

It comes down to this: As Jess goes to the cross, he goes with great courage and never-ending love. He doesn't want to lose a single one, and that includes you and me. Amen. .

