

March 18, 2018

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Mark 14: 53-72

Prayer: Dear Lord, Stay with us during this season of Lent, as we make our feeble attempt to understand your last days on earth. Teach us what you would have us know about that time. In the name you wore while here, Amen.

A Gospel Sandwich

In 18th century England there lived a man of royal ancestry named John Montague. Like other young men of his standing, he was educated at Eton, then Cambridge.

Throughout his political career, he had many impressive posts – Lord of the Admiralty, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, Postmaster General.

But I daresay that’s not why we remember Montague. We remember him because of his fondness for the gambling table. As play went on and on, he didn’t want to stop for meals. So he would ask his servants to bring him slices of meat between two slices of bread.

And because Montague was the Earl of Sandwich, the other players would call, “I’ll have the same as Sandwich!”

And thus was born that most glorious of foods, the love of Dagwood Bumstead's life, the sandwich.

One of our church partners brought hot dogs for Sunday lunch last month. I ate mine with only a fresh bun and the scary processed meat we call a hot dog. No mustard or ketchup or onions or chili or relish. I didn't even need a plate. Our staff member Kreg looked at me as if to say, *Why bother?*

But it was delicious. I would *never* have eaten a white bread bun alone or a hot dog alone unless I was starving on some desert island. But the fresh bread enhanced the taste of that roasted hot dog. And the roasted hot dog enhanced the taste of that fresh white bread.

In other words, they complemented each other. They commented on each other. Therein lies the genius of the sandwich.

But Lord Sandwich's gift to us didn't stop with food. The lowly word evolved to refer to all sorts of things with two identical ends and a middle.

We sandwich a lunch hour into our work day – and use it to “grab a sandwich.”

In a football game, two opposing defenders might sandwich a receiver.

A mother once told me she had a boy sandwich – meaning she had girl, boy, girl.

Any brother who grew up between two sisters will tell you how they commented on

his life. Or maybe just aggravated it.

Well, long before the Earl of Sandwich gave us a word for it, the gospel writer Mark used the sandwich to great effect. It was a writing technique he used quite often.

For instance, he told us the story of Jesus being called to heal Jairus' daughter. Then he interrupted that story with the story about a hemorrhaging woman. Then he completed the story of the daughter's healing. One story was inserted into another. Each story commented on the other.

Like a good sandwich, each story flavored the other.

Mark used the technique again when Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem during Passion Week. They passed an unproductive fig tree and Jesus cursed it. Then they went into the unproductive temple, where Jesus overthrew the moneychangers' tables. They came out and passed the fig tree again, and found it withered.

One story was inserted into another. Each story interpreted the other – a non-producing fig tree, a non-producing temple.

Like a good sandwich, each story flavored the other.

Mark used this sandwich technique over and over. He used it in today's passage,

as we resume reading where we left off last week. Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 14: 53-72**.

In this passage, there are two distinct activities going on at once – Jesus on trial before the Sanhedrin, and Peter facing questions out in the courtyard. As we read, look for how Mark sandwiches Jesus’ trial into Peter’s story. How do these stories comment on each other? How do they flavor each other?

53 They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.

(OK, here comes the first slice of bread.) ⁵⁴Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

(Here’s the filling.) ⁵⁵Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸“We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.” ’ ⁵⁹But even on this point their testimony did not agree.

⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' ⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'

⁶²Jesus said, '*I am*; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven." '

⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?'

All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, 'Prophecy!' The guards also took him over and beat him.

(Here's the second slice of bread.) ⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.'

⁶⁸But he denied it, saying, 'I do not know or understand what you are talking about.' And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.

⁶⁹And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, 'This man is one of them.' ⁷⁰But again he denied it.

Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you

are one of them; for you are a Galilean.’⁷¹ But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know this man you are talking about.’

⁷²At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’

And he broke down and wept.

Because of time constraints, we typically don’t read these passages together. And we miss what Mark was trying to say by placing them the way he did – Jesus’ story sandwiched inside Peter’s story.

He was commenting on our human fecklessness, represented by Peter, and God’s faithfulness, represented by Jesus.

Remember! Mark was writing to a group of frightened believers who were being persecuted by the Roman Emperor Nero and who were witnessing the scary Roman-Jewish War, possibly even the fall of Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus had been gone for 40 years or so, and surely they were wondering if they shouldn’t expect some sort of protection, some sort of benefit from God, for their belief.

So Mark wrote his story of Jesus – the first to be written down – in such a way as to show them their Savior also suffered. *But look at how he did it.*

According to Mark, the trial was a sham: **“They were looking for testimony**

against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.”

“... (M)any gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.”

“Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.” ’

In fact, Jesus did not say that, so Mark added, **“But even on this point their testimony did not agree.”**

Mark took great pains to show Jesus alone and innocent in a sea of degradation, dishonesty and injustice.

After all this false testimony, the high priest asked Jesus if he was the Messiah and the son of the Blessed One. Jesus answered with the same words that God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, the same words Jesus echoed when he walked on the Sea of Galilee, the words known as a claim to divinity: ***“I am.”***

I am who I am.

The high priest certainly understood the reference. That’s why he tore his clothes, accused Jesus of blasphemy and pushed through his death penalty conviction.

And then Mark provided the second slice of bread, the contrasting story of Peter in the courtyard. Whereas Jesus spoke truth, Peter did not.

He said he didn't know what was going on. **“I do not know or understand what you are talking about.”**

He said he was not a follower of the arrested man.

And finally, he cursed and swore that he didn't even *know* Jesus. **“I do not know this man you are talking about.”**

This is a pretty devastating picture of Peter. But remember, Mark's readers knew of the great preacher Peter became. They knew he went from denying Jesus to proclaiming Jesus. They knew he was executed as a Christian martyr just a few years before this gospel was written.

Billy Graham died recently at age 99. But he had had several health scares 15 years or so before.

I was the religion writer for *The Greenville News* during that time, so I was assigned to write an advance obituary for him. News outlets typically do that with famous people such as Billy Graham or Strom Thurmond or Carroll Campbell. They don't want to be caught flatfooted trying to write those stories on deadline.

So I spent quite a bit of time researching Rev. Graham's biographies and interviewing some of his friends in this area. He did a remarkable job of steering clear of the sexual entrapments and financial scandals that ensnared so many of his evangelistic contemporaries. He was ahead of his time in demanding racial integration of his Crusades.

But even he admitted that he had gotten too close to presidential power. He had let being the "pastor to presidents" cloud his judgment.

To most of us, that didn't diminish his reputation. It made him human.

I think that's what's going on with Mark's depiction here of Peter. From early church history, we know that Mark was a follower, a disciple, of Peter. He loved Peter, and wasn't trying to shame him. But he's holding up this great preacher of the early church and showing us that he, too, experienced human frailty.

Mark's readers were facing persecution for being followers of Christ.

Would they react as Peter did here, denying they ever knew him?

Or would they stand up as Jesus did, knowing what he said was going to get him killed?

You know, when we read Scripture, we need to think of it on all these levels.

What was the situation at the time the story was taking place?

What was the situation when the story was being written?

What is the situation for us, as readers 2,000 years removed?

Two thousand years later, in the United States, at least, we are in no danger for proclaiming our allegiance to Christ. But do we proclaim him, even proclaim him loudly, then live in ways that deny him?

Do we proclaim Jesus with our lips and deny him with our lives?

There's actually a passage in the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus says, **'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" ²³Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."** (Matthew 7:21-23)

That is a sobering passage. Jesus is distinctly differentiating between what we say and what we do. What we proclaim and what we live out. What our words say and what our lives say.

Peter said he didn't know Jesus. How would he have felt if Jesus said he didn't know him?

How would we feel if Jesus said he didn't know us?

Our understanding of grace is that God is the instigator and doesn't choose us based on worthiness. He accepts us in our human frailty.

Yet, at the same time, he calls us to live in ways that are pleasing to him.

I think most of the time we know when we are behaving in ways that are pleasing to him, and we know when we're not.

Today's Scripture passage ends with the cock crowing and Peter remembering Jesus's prediction that that he would deny him three times.

“And (Peter) broke down and wept.”

Peter knew instantly what he had done, how he had denied his Savior with both words and actions. Then he spent the entire book of Acts doing something about it.

We can do the same. During this Lenten season, we are making a point of dwelling in the Passion narrative. We want to make sure we understand the trials and the suffering, the heartbreak and the cross before leaping to Easter morning.

But we *do* know how the story ends. We know that we don't have to continue living in denial of our Savior.

In fact, we must not.

We must live, instead, in a way that whispers his love with every word we utter, and shouts it with every hand we extend.

Amen.