

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
M. Craig Barnes

Have you ever tried to save Jesus from making a mistake? Maybe your health isn't improving, or your child isn't making good choices. Or maybe it's your job, church, or justice itself that is in trouble. Jesus could have helped. You think he should have helped. But the help never came, so you decide to help Jesus help us.

The disciple Peter tried more than once to save Jesus. Like us, he had some big dreams for what Jesus was supposed to do. Peter knew Jesus was the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior. Peter was so committed to this mission for Jesus that he would do anything for him. And he would pay the cost. When Jesus called for him, Peter immediately dropped his fishing nets to follow, and walked away from the security of the old life because he was committed. When Jesus predicted his upcoming death, Peter said, "God forbid, I will never let this happen to you." And when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter ran into the crowd with a sword flailing around him. But all he did was cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. (How did Peter get a sword?)

We fight so hard to protect our Jesus. We pray and argue with him to save the day—fix our kids, change our spouse, improve our future, and please do something about the mess of our world. But if Jesus doesn't pull through as the hero, we try to take over and be the hero for him as Messiah wanna-bes. But what are we really fighting for? Not Jesus who is determined to go to a cross. No, we are fighting for our own dreams.

Someone, like the High Priest's servant always gets hurts when we fight—even for a dream. Do you really have to think that hard to remember the wounds you have created? You were just trying to work hard, to make it happen, to improve things. But a spouse, an ex-spouse, a child, or an aging parent was wounded along the way. Maybe it was because there was so little time for them. Or maybe you tried to hard to recreate them in your own image of who they should be. There are always innocent casualties in battle. And the wounds you create in others, leave wounds on your own soul that never heal.

The authors of Scripture sometimes say as much by how they arrange their material as they do by the words they use. In John 18:15-18, we're told that after being arrested, Jesus is taken to the home of the High Priest. Peter is outside in the courtyard, warming himself with the very people who had just dragged Jesus out of the garden. Maybe he flinched when he heard Jesus getting slapped inside. A woman asks, "You are not also one of this man's disciples are you?" Peter says, "I am not." That was his first denial.

In verses 19-24: the scene shifts to the trial inside the High Priest's home. Jesus is asked about his teaching. He simply says, "My teaching is public. If you want to know what I have said, ask those who heard me." Notice that Jesus is basing his defense on the testimony of the disciples.

Then in verses 25-27 the scene returns immediately back to Peter, and we hear him deny Jesus a second and then a third time. Inside Jesus is basing his defense on his disciples will to declare what he has said. Outside, the bravest of those disciples is denying any knowledge of the man. Peter's failure is so great! John could not have written this to accent the failure any more dramatically.

Why did Peter fail his Lord? It wasn't because he was a coward. Again, Peter has already tried to defend Jesus, and it was Jesus who stopped him. Peter denied he was a disciple, a follower, because it was the truth. He couldn't follow Jesus to the cross. That night by the fire Peter took his place with those who took Jesus captive because it was where he belonged. He too had tried to capture Jesus with expectations that had not worked out. Now he knew it was over. But the questions just kept coming. "Are you a disciple?" "NO! NO! NO! I am not, I am not, I am not a follower of Jesus.

We tend to think that in these denials about being a disciple Peter is lying. But actually, for the first time Peter is telling the truth. He is not really a disciple. He never has been. What he has been following, is not Jesus but his dreams of what Jesus would do.

Now we who have followed Jesus for a long time, or at least into the sanctuary tonight, must respond to those same questions as Jesus is led to the cross. "Are you a disciple? Are you a disciple? Are you really a disciple?" Oh, how we would love to say "yes" to those questions. If only Jesus would forget about this cross and get back to the business of making our dreams come true. But, he won't. Now that is so clear. So again, and again we hear the relentless questions this night presses upon us: Are you still going to follow Jesus? Are you going to follow to the cross? Are you going to follow even if it means the death of your dreams? Maybe, like Peter, the most heroic thing we can do is simply confessing the truth. "No. No we really can't continue to follow Jesus."

Our passage ends today with a rooster crowing, which signals the end of the dark night, and the beginning of morning when the light pierces through. After hearing the crowing, Peter remembered that Jesus had told him this would happen. As he walked away, he had to be asking himself, "Why? Why did he insist on this cross? I have seen Jesus do the most miraculous things. Why wouldn't he use one of those miracles now?"

Ah, but he did. In going to the cross, Jesus was revealing the greatest miracle of all. The Son of God was about to lay down his life for Peter. The only true hero always knew he had to die for Peter's sins and for yours and mine.

Sin is anything that separates you from God. Nothing will do that quite like your dreams if you love them more than God, who is not a means to an end. God is God. And eventually, like Peter you have to ask yourself if you will worship God when there is no instrumental benefit.

If also like Peter, you find that to be too hard a question, and if you know the real answer is no, I have been following a Savior because I had plans for him, then you should also know the answer to the question "Why did Jesus have to go to a cross?" It was because he was dying to love you. And only that sacred love can reach over the sin that separates you from God.

Now your question is why isn't the forgiving love of God enough? Why do you need more than a God dying to love you? Amen.