

Surely Not I, Lord?

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins

Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 26:14-30

God of Merciful Love: You have promised never to break your covenant with us in Christ. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Give us the courage and strength to respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives. In Christ. Amen

Over a decade ago I attended a meeting of my presbytery in Pennsylvania. The moderator surprised most of us by announcing that an investigative commission was being formed, composed of two elders and two ministers, because an ordained person --- we were never told if it was male or female, elder or minister --- had been accused of behavior contrary to ordained life. No name was ever mentioned, obviously to protect what in the end might have been an innocent person. All we were told is that an accusation had been made and an investigation was to begin.

When it came time to break for dinner, I, along with at least five other ministers, approached the moderator, not to ask who the accused was, but to learn if the accusation had been made against us. The moderator, one of the best ministers I have ever known, replied by saying that he could not release the identity of the accused, but he could tell us that it was not one of the six who approached him.

In my kind of work and perhaps in many others, an accusation is often just as bad as an offense, so the six of us were all frightened that someone, anyone, could have made an unwarranted charge, and even though we would not be found guilty, the damage had already been done.

But there was another perspective. I can't speak for the other five scared ministers, but I can tell you that I was talking to the moderator because I *knew* I had broken my vows of ordination. No elder or minister or deacon has ever been completely faithful to those vows. Every last one of the ordained has fallen short. Had I lost my temper or not made a pastoral visit to someone in anguish? Had I insisted on my own way instead of seeking

the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life? Had I forgotten my family to remember the Church?

I was guilty, and I knew it. Driving home from presbytery that night I wondered why *every* elder and minister wasn't standing before the moderator asking, "Is it I?"

On the last night of his life Jesus informs his twelve apostles that one of them will betray him. All twelve respond with four words: "Surely not I, Lord?" Those four words could be a statement, in essence, a vow, something like, "No, Jesus, surely not I. I would never do that, never betray you." But there's a question mark after those four words in Matthew's gospel. It's not a declaration of faith. It's a way by which they are really questioning their faithfulness and allegiance to Jesus. They don't doubt Jesus. They doubt themselves. Jesus never responds to eleven of them, and responds only cryptically to the twelfth, Judas, to whom he says, "You have said so."

Try to remember this scene from Matthew's gospel. It destroys the myth that Jesus will always make you feel good. All twelve want Jesus to say, "Oh no, [Matthew or Peter or Bartholomew or John]. It's not you. I'm sorry if my words made you think so. Be at ease. Feel good about yourself. You will never betray me."

That's the "feel good" Jesus you will never find in the gospels. I don't think Jesus was sent to us to make us feel good, but he does make us *do* good. Granted, Jesus doesn't want us to feel bad, but he is a gift from God to strengthen us, to challenge us, to embolden us, to lead us, and to transform us, but not to make us feel good. When the twelve ask, "Surely not I, Lord?" they want Jesus to come into their corner and lift their hearts of the guilt they feel because they *all* will betray him, even though Judas will more aggressively turn against him, no less for profit.

All the apostles are guilty and will be guilty, even after the resurrection. In the same way I felt guilty at that presbytery meeting, having fallen short of my ordination vows, they not only felt guilty. They *were* guilty.

And here's something you won't hear too many ministers say. Guilt is fundamentally a good and healthy experience in our Christian walk. I say "fundamentally" because people have been destroyed by guilt and some even institutionalized because they were made to feel guilty about everything. Bad religion can do that. But understood properly and graciously, guilt can be a healthy influence on our lives.

There was an extremely influential man in England whose life spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His name was Lord Moulton. He played several roles in his life, but mostly he was a barrister, what we call a lawyer in our country. Lord Moulton once said, "The measure of a civilization is its obedience to the unenforceable." Society holds together because most of us are inclined to do good, and many of us do good because we feel guilty when we don't. Of course we do good because Christ commands it, and when we disappoint him, we feel guilty. No one can force us to follow Christ. There are no "enforcers" in our Christian walk. We follow Jesus because we love him. "The measure of a civilization is its obedience to the unenforceable."

Now here are some questions this scene from Matthew 26 brings to light. Why do all the apostles feel guilty? Why do they all ask, "Surely not I, Lord?" Why did I feel guilty at presbytery when I had been accused of nothing? The answer is simple. Because Christ has high, incredibly high, expectations of us, and he will not lower the bar just so you and I can enter the Kingdom. We all betray Jesus because his standards are high --- the highest --- but he will not lower those standards to make us feel good.

I don't know whether you know this about me, but I would have made a wonderful Hugh Hefner. Most men would! It's easy, conspicuously easy, to see women as objects rather than persons. It's easy to see women as things to be used rather than human beings to be loved. It's easy to flit from one woman to another without making commitments. Hugh Hefner has never betrayed his standards because he has none. He has set the bar so low that you can walk over it, not under it. It's easy to hit your target when you're standing only a few feet away, and did you ever notice that no one has ever accused Hugh Hefner of hypocrisy, a charge leveled against

us Christians every day? Hypocrites have standards they break, but Hugh can't break a standard he doesn't have. It's easy and sinfully proud to be a playboy, but it's tough to be a Christian man or, for that matter, a Christian woman. Christ, however, will not lower the bar so that you and I can find a cheap way into the Kingdom.

That's why all the apostles failed, both before and after the resurrection. That's why I have failed in my ordination vows. We are not what God intended. That's the bad news. But here's the good news. *We are becoming something new.* We are being transformed. We may have failed Jesus. We may even fail him each day, but he will not fail us. We are not what we should be, but we are not what we once were, and even though we betray Jesus, he still loves us. He still loves us into being, beautifully and wonderfully, even when we say, "Surely not I, Lord?"