

The Sifting Process  
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OT Reading: Jeremiah 31: 2-6

NT Reading: Luke 22:31-34, 61-62

Have you ever failed? Have you ever felt like you let every down including God? I know I have more times than I care to think about. Last Sunday was Easter and we came together to visit and celebrate an empty tomb. Maybe you went to the tomb with the same joy and excitement that the women must have had when they found the tomb empty, or maybe, you came to the tomb with a broken and defeated spirit like Peter, or maybe some of you like Judas have never approached the tomb; to see Jesus because you feel your mistakes are too big and you have lost your faith. No matter where you are right now, I hope that when you leave this place today, you will be encouraged to run towards our Savior.

Please pray with me

Scripture Luke 22: 31-34, 61-62

Often times, I think we look at Peter, and the other disciples and shake our heads. We may call them cowards and say to ourselves how could they? I would never have responded the way they did, especially after getting to spend 3 years with Jesus; and maybe you are correct. Maybe you would never have responded that way, but maybe you don't struggle with running away when you are scared, but you struggle with something, we all do. And perhaps those disciples would look at us and ponder why we struggle the way we do. For example, maybe you wouldn't give up your career for Jesus the

way all the disciples did. I'm not saying this to make feel bad and/or condemn you, rather I say this to remind you that we all struggle with sin and disobedience at some point during our lives and it is not our place to judge.

In Matthew 7, the Bible reminds us not to judge others and to remove the plank from our own eye before we point out the dust in someone else's eye. Some of you may be thinking I don't have a problem with judging others and I don't condemn people, but be careful because judgment moves in a very subtle way. Our judgment does not look like someone yelling or screaming that the another person is wrong or evil, rather it's that the small thought that has us comparing ourselves to them. If we don't watch for this, before you know it, like me, you may find that you have given yourself the role of judge and once you do that, it's a humbling experience when you come down from the seat of judgment.

Recently I've found myself in a situation where I wasn't exactly sure how God wanted me to respond so I prayed for guidance and tried my best to do what I thought God wanted me to do. Often times I felt like I was doing the right thing, but then there were moments along my journey that I knew I had acted out my will rather than God's and some of my choices were clearly not in line with God's word. My disobedience left me feeling isolated, because I wanted to confide in my Godly friend, but I was afraid too. I found that I wasn't afraid of confessing to her, rather I was afraid because I thought I would let her down, that I would be a disappointment. I thought I was too far along in my spiritual journey to stumble so easily...and here is

how I subtly overtime I found that I was sitting as judge in the judgment seat....

The reason I feared disappointing my friend, is that like Peter, I had judged myself to be stronger than I actually was....in Matthew 26: Peter says to Jesus "*Even if all fall away on account of you I never will!*"

Wow!! What Peter is really saying here, is that I'm the best and strongest disciple! Even if the rest of these guys fail you I never will; that's a bold statement and if we're honest with ourselves we have all said something similar.

Maybe you've said that you would never steal, but have found that you don't give the gov't everything it's due, maybe you said you would never let your kids watch this or that, and you have found that you have given in, or maybe you said you would never be unfaithful and find yourself confiding in someone who is not your spouse or significant other, or maybe you look at others and think what you own, wear or eat is better than them.... I could go on, but we all have compared ourselves to someone else and what we are really doing is standing in judgment of them. And the dangerous thing about doing this is that we create a blind spot in our spiritual armor, and it left unprotected, we put ourselves in danger of falling in the same trap, which is what happened to Peter and to me, and probably to many of you.

Recently I was talking to my friend Anna about a struggle she was going through and she said to me: I know better and after all these years of following Jesus you think I wouldn't struggle anymore, that I should have this obedience thing down by now. When Anna said this, it was like she was

speaking my thoughts, because like her I was struggling and it was because slowly over time I started relying on my own strength and wisdom rather than Gods... I found we were just like Peter!

So lets go back to what Jesus said to Peter before he denied him

*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*

I would like to point out some 3 important aspects of this verse

First: Jesus knew how Peter would respond. Peter was surprised that he denies Jesus, like many of us, he truly thought that he would never fall away, that he would never deny Jesus. Why would he think otherwise, considering how much he loved him? The fact that Jesus knew beforehand how Peter would respond gives me hope. When Jesus first asked Peter to put down his nets and follow him, he knew that in 3 short years Peter would deny him, yet he still chose him! This fills me with more hope then I can properly express. God does not expect us to be perfect, rather we put that expectation on ourselves. When I make mistakes, I wonder how God could have picked me, and if I'm really the right girl for the task at hand; but when I read this, it reminds me that though I've failed, he knew I would and that my failure is not the end of my journey, nor is it the end of yours.

Second: Jesus prayed for Peter, and he prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. This is very important, because it tells us that Jesus prays for us, he is

our intercessor and he prays for us before a trial, during a trial and after a trial. Another important part of this, is that Jesus prayed that Peter's faith would not fail, he did not pray that Peter would not fail, which I think is very telling. We are human and we fail but it does not mean that our faith will fail. With our faith in tack, we may cross the finish line bruised and bloody but we will cross the finish line.

During Holy Week we are given an example of a man who fails, and an example of a man whose faith fails him and they have drastically different ending. We will talk about Peter's ending in a minute, but lets take a moment and look at Judas. In today's language we would say that he is an EPIC failure; because not only did the man fail, his faith also failed and due to this he ran from Jesus and his story has a tragic ending. I truly believe that if he could have held on to a little faith, he would have been able to come back to Jesus and Jesus would have taken his burdens and breathed new life into Judas.... imagine how powerful Judas' testimony would have been, if he just had a little faith in the God who loved us enough to send his only son to die for us...and I think this is why Jesus prayed for Peter's faith, rather than Peter himself, there is a real danger in losing our faith.

Last but not least, our scripture tells us that Satan asked to sift Peter and God said yes. This is not the first time God said yes to sifting (remember Job), and Peter was not the last time God said yes to this request. I know about 6 years ago, God allowed Satan to sift me and though it was extremely painful, it built my faith and just like Peter, it has allowed me to strengthen others. We are all called to a heavenly purpose, a purpose we can only accomplish in God's strength. 2 Cor 2:19 tells us that "My strength (God's) is

made perfect in weakness." God is not looking for the strong to lead his church rather he is looking for the weak, who get their strength from him, which is exactly why Satan was allowed to sift Peter.

Peter has so many gifts: he was strong, bold, confident and fearless, but he was also prideful which led him to rely on his own strength, for heaven's sake Peter carried a sword around with him, he was with Jesus a man who could calm a storm and drive out demons.....what did he really think he was going to do with that sword?! 😊 Peter had to be sifted so that the pride he had in his own abilities could be broken, and this brokenness allowed him to be used by God. So church, don't be afraid of your brokenness, or of the trials in your life, because as our OT scripture reminds us: He will draw us in and build us up again.

I will conclude with these 2 points:

1. When we stumble and fall, God calls us back to him with open arms. In Mark 16:7 the angel at the empty tomb told the women to go get the disciples AND Peter, he specifically asked for Peter. Like the bleeding woman and the women at the well and everyone else who is broken by sin, God does not let us go unseen, rather he calls us to him by name
2. If you think your failure is too great, remember Jesus's came into this world from a genealogy full of people who failed and we are in this building right now, and know the Gospel because after Peter failed, he got up and strengthened his brothers and sisters and those people spend their lives spreading the good news, which has led us today, 2016. God uses everything for his good, including our failures....so run to him not from him!! For like the father in the story of the prodigal son, Jesus is running to us.