

Midweek 3
Hands of Misguided Zeal (Peter)
Sermon Text: John 18:4-11

Of course it was Peter. Of the four gospel accounts that record what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane on Holy Thursday, only John identifies Peter as the disciple who grabbed his sword and gashed the right ear of the high priest's servant. But if John would have omitted that little detail, if the disciple who was responsible would have gone unnamed in all four gospels, if you would have been left to guess the identity of the guilty party, is it possible that your initial reaction would have been, "That sounds like something Peter might do"?

Simon Peter was one of the Lord's first and closest followers. Because he so often took the lead, Peter had also taken on the unofficial role of leader among the disciples. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. When Jesus asked the Twelve who they thought he was, it was Peter who confessed, **"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"** (Mt 16:16). When Jesus approached his disciples by walking on water in the middle of the night, Peter was the only one to jump out of the boat to meet him (Mt 14:29). And in the upper room, after Jesus predicted that all the disciples would abandon him, Peter was the first to pledge that he would rather die than disown his Savior (Mt 26:35).

But there were other occasions when Peter's react-before-you-think attitude didn't serve him so well. Shortly after Peter made his beautiful confession of faith, he took Jesus aside and tried to convince him that going to Jerusalem and dying on a cross should not be a part of the Messiah's mission. Do you remember how Jesus responded to Peter's attempts to persuade him? He said, **"Get behind me, Satan!"** (Mt 16:23).

I am confident that Peter never forgot this stinging rebuke, but I am also convinced that he didn't fully understand it—because we find him going down a similar path in the inspired words before us tonight. The only difference is that instead of using words to impede God's plan of salvation, this time Peter resorted to using brute force.

We know why Jesus' enemies came to the garden. They hated him. They were armed with swords and clubs because they intended to kill him. But Peter wielded his weapon for a very different reason. He loved Jesus. He wanted Jesus to know that he was serious when he said that he would give up his life for him. Peter was full of what he believed to be a righteous zeal, but that zeal turned out to be misguided.

You and I love Jesus too. We become upset, even angry, when our Savior's name is dragged through the mud. And when we see how his Word is ignored and ridiculed in our world, we want to do something about it. We want to protect Jesus. We want to defend Jesus. Those are good and godly impulses, but we need to be careful that we don't go too far, that we ourselves don't do something that goes against God's Word, that we don't become guilty of having . . .

Hands of Misguided Zeal

Besides identifying Peter as the disciple who assaulted Malchus, only John reports something else that happened that night, something that clears up any confusion about who was in control of the situation in the garden. And it wasn't the Jewish officials or the small army of soldiers who had come to arrest Jesus.

Instead of hiding in the shadows or heading for the hills, Jesus went out to meet his would-be captors. And the One who knew everything that was about to happen to him also knew the answer to the question he asked the soldiers, **“Who is it you want?”** (v. 4). They wanted Jesus. They had been wanting to get rid of him for a long time. The only reason this attempt would be successful was because Jesus’ time had come.

Jesus declared, **“I am he”** (v. 5), and the soldiers rushed at him, bound him, and led him back into the city. But that’s not exactly what happened, is it? Something else happened. Something totally unexpected and unexplainable happened. When Jesus announced that he was the man they were looking for, they drew back and toppled like bowling pins. Without raising his hand, without lifting a finger, Jesus demonstrated his divine power with only his powerful Word.

But Jesus wasn’t finished yet. Even though he was vastly outnumbered, he was the one giving the orders. Even though he would have had every right to defend himself, he was more concerned about the welfare of his followers. He told the crowd, **“If you are looking for me, then let these men go”** (v. 8), making good on his promise to protect his own.

And Peter was right there taking it all in. He had seen how the mob had been forced to bow down before Jesus and how quickly they acquiesced to the Lord’s terms of surrender. But instead of taking advantage of the peaceful release Jesus had negotiated, Peter decided to take matters into his own hands. Without any warning he drew his sword and **“struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear”** (v. 10).

What was Peter thinking? We can understand that question in a “I can’t believe Peter would do something like that” sense, or we can take it more literally. When Peter raised his sword, what was he really thinking? One possibility is that he wasn’t thinking. He saw his friend surrounded by hostile men who wanted to harm him, and his instincts and emotions took over.

Another possibility is that Peter did think things through before he sprang into action. He had replayed in his mind his pledge to defend Jesus to the death. He had convinced himself that this was going to be the night he would give up his life. He could see that his Savior needed help, and in spite of the odds, he was going to come to the rescue.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to help a friend in need, except for the fact that Jesus doesn’t need any help—because Jesus is true God. He is omniscient (he knows all). He is omnipotent (he controls all). Of all people, Peter should have known that. In the garden (and for three years before that) he had been given many convincing proofs of that. Peter was guilty of assaulting another human being, but his decision to strike with his sword was only a symptom of a much more fundamental problem. By deciding that he needed to do something to help Jesus, Peter demonstrated a lack of understanding, or even worse, a lack of trust in God.

It could be a struggle for us to find parallels to what Peter did, to come up with examples of Christians who used force to defend or advance the Christian cause. We might think of things like the Crusades or the Inquisition (which were some of the darkest days in the history of the church) or more recently, a Christian extremist bombing an abortion clinic. But for the most part, modern Christianity is a peaceful religion. And I think that I speak for the rest of us when I say that any kind of violence directed at another person (in the name of God or for any other reason) is a clear violation of the Fifth Commandment.

But doubting God's power, that's something I can relate to. Not trusting in God is a sin my sinful nature understands very well. Believing there is something I can do to help God, thinking I need to do something to help God, that is a trap Christians fall into far too often. "If we would only elect the right political leaders or pass the right legislation, then we could get back to the good old days when our country was a Christian nation." "If our church only initiated more programs for families or talked less about sin or was more like *that* church in town, then our congregation would grow." If *we* only did X,Y, or Z, then *we* could make things better.

If you want to identify the problem, look at the pronouns. Or better yet, look in the mirror. You don't have to hold a sword in your hands to be able to identify with Peter. You probably don't have to try too hard to remember times in your life when your thinking was misguided. Yes, God wants God-fearing leaders. Yes, God wants healthy churches. Yes, God wants Christians to be filled with a godly zeal, but before we put our faith into practice, he wants us to put our trust in him. He wants us to make God's Word and will our guide. And he wants us to understand how quickly things can go sideways when we don't.

Jesus reprimanded Peter, **"Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"** (v. 11). Why was Jesus so upset? Why was Jesus so adamant? Because he knew what was at stake. Because he understood that there is only one way for sins to be forgiven, that there is only one path that leads to heaven. God the Father's plan demanded that his Son be arrested that night and executed the next day. And that plan was carried out to perfection when our perfect substitute died in our place. Jesus willingly took that cup of suffering into his hands and drained it to the dregs to demonstrate how much he loved his misguided disciple—and how much he loves you and me.

John provides us with several unique details about what happened in the garden that night, but he doesn't tell us what happened to the man Peter struck with his sword. He doesn't tell us what happened to Malchus. The gospel of Luke reports that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the servant's ear and healed him (22:51).

It was Jesus' final miracle before his crucifixion. So why did he do it? Why did he heal this man's ear? Why was he so eager to help his enemy? Because that is who Jesus is. Because that is what Jesus does. Jesus came into this world to seek and to save. Jesus has a burning love for lost souls. Jesus is full of compassion and mercy, which explains why, a few hours after he healed Malchus, he reached out his hands one last time. He stretched out his hands on the cross to redeem us from our sins, to fulfill Isaiah's prophetic words, so that by his wounds we might be healed (53:5). Amen.