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Psalm 25:1-10

Matthew 26:31-35; 69-75

## GRACE AT THE CRUX: DENY-ABILITY

During this Lenten season, we are focusing on the events leading to the crucifixion of our Lord, finding that we are met by God's grace each step along the way. As Jesus anticipates what would be happening to him, he realizes that when the going gets tough, his disciples were going to desert him. In our reading from Matthew, he tells them as much, using a word that doesn't come through in the English translation. 'You will all fall away' – in the Greek it is 'you will all be scandalized because of me this night.' We know of various scandals within the church when young people have been sexually abused by church leaders or an insider has stolen church funds. But the biggest scandal is that the Son of God submits to the violence of mere humans and dies, the Messiah is arrested, tried, and executed as a common criminal – this is the biggest scandal of the Christian faith.

The Greek word for 'scandalized' is also used earlier in Matthew when Jesus gives his interpretation of the parable of the sower, describing those who are like seed sown on rocky soil. Such a person is like a plant that has no deep roots, but endures just for a while until trouble arises and then quickly withers and falls away – again in Greek, is scandalized. As Jesus will be arrested and put on trial, the disciples, without sufficient roots, will be scandalized and will fall away.

When Peter hears Jesus' prediction of his followers deserting him, proud as a rooster, he crows, "Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." But Jesus sadly tells him, "This very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." We then move further into the story where Jesus has been arrested, and taken to the house of the high priest. Peter is in the courtyard outside that residence, quietly trying to find out what is going on. Even as Jesus was being unjustly interrogated inside, Peter was surprised to face his own milder interrogation outside in the courtyard. Later followers of Jesus, those who were the

initial readers of Matthew's Gospel when it was written about fifty years after the events described, were also facing interrogators with the possibility of persecution for themselves. They would see the difference between what Jesus and Peter modeled. The latter's goal had been to stay just close enough to see what was going to happen to Jesus without much risk. He was curious, very concerned, but his capacity to do something courageous on behalf of Jesus was not there. He wanted to believe his faith was stronger than it was. A female servant in the courtyard noticed Peter and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." Peter quickly denied it. He wandered out to the porch, where another female servant saw him and said to those with her, "This man was with Jesus the Nazarene." Again, Peter denies it, this time with an oath. He was not facing anywhere near as powerful a person as was Jesus, and yet in the midst of the dizzying events, Peter felt the need to deny this most important relationship. He had now drawn unwanted attention - others who were there said to him, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your (Galilean) accent betrays you." Peter curses and swears an oath, telling them, "I do not know the man!" At that moment, the cock crowed, and Peter realized to his great dismay, that Jesus' prediction had indeed come true.

There is more than one way we can respond to such a story. We are sitting in a church based on the ministry of Jesus Christ – we aren't denying him by being here. Yet, this is a safe place. Unlike some Christians in certain parts of the world where persecution takes place, we generally have not faced a very high cost for being followers of Jesus Christ. However, some of the choices we make may show more dedication to convenience than to Christ. At a time in our society, when people of faith are often portrayed in a negative light, and sometimes deservedly so, are we willing to let people know at work or in our neighborhood that we are Christians? As a matter of faith, do we rise to the defense of people who are being treated unjustly? Do we stay silent when hateful talk and actions take place around us or in the public arena? Does our level of generosity, our desire to forgive someone who has wronged us, our willingness to show love to someone who is hated, show us to be someone who follows Jesus at a safe distance or someone who readily accepts that Christian discipleship carries some cost with it?

Don't you wonder why Jesus made reference to the cock crowing as part of his prediction of Peter's unfaithfulness? Years ago, I went with a church group to Nicaragua to see how the people there were doing, after having gone through a terrible earthquake even while there was great political turmoil there. In one of the villages to which we traveled, our accommodations consisted of a little rooming facility where we each had a bedroom about twice the size of the single bed that was in it. The restroom facilities could be described as 'down the path.' In the rooms, there was no electricity, so we relied on candlelight for the limited time we were inside. The walls of the room had angled slats to let light in during the day and to allow for some welcome circulation of air during this summer night. Of course, the openings in the walls also allowed the sounds from outside to drift into our rooms. But it was a quiet village, so I had peaceful rest until about four in the morning. It was then that a rooster who sounded like he was so close that he was in my room, took it upon himself to announce that daylight was on the way. The dawn of the new day was not yet apparent. It was still pitch dark in my little room. But the crowing of the rooster, as unwelcome as it was at that hour, told me that daylight was going to come.

When Peter realized the scandalous thing he had done, he broke down and wept, not realizing in his dark night of unfaithfulness, that by God's grace, he would be moving toward daylight. We remember the later stories about Peter, after the resurrection, after he was filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, how he openly and courageously declared his faith in Jesus Christ in the light of day before large crowds. The symbol of the Holy Spirit is typically a dove. But I think God's Spirit was at work in the form of a rooster that night. As painful as that was for Peter, his scandalous denial was met by the greater scandal of God's grace that moved him toward the day of Pentecost.

I occasionally get a question about our worship practice of including a prayer of confession of sin every Sunday. Some might think its wording is a bit too negative about ourselves. Yet, with Peter's denying experience all too often being part of your story and mine, a prayer of confession can be a softly-crowing rooster, if we pay attention to it. God does not desire that we walk around with the weight of harsh judgment and guilt on our shoulders. Instead, as we become aware of and

admit our shortcomings before God and neighbor, we are not just more aware of our guilt. We are, by God's grace, moving toward daylight. Whether it is a rooster crowing, a prayer of confession, the season of Lent - whatever speaks to us to help us know that daylight is on the way, let us listen to that. God's grace is rooted in the unearned, unmerited, unconditional love of God. Let's seek to be deeply rooted in that, so that we are less likely to live out a scandal of unfaithfulness when things get tough. God's gift of daylight will come, and with God's help, our words and actions can be closer to courageous than cowardly, even as we affirm what the rooster did - that daylight, intended for all, is coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe, it is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise.

You are our God, and we are the creatures of your hand.

You made us from the dust of the earth, breathed into us the breath of life, and set us in your world to love and serve you.

When we denied your love and ignored your wisdom, you did not reject us.

You loved us still and called us to turn again to you in obedience and in love.

*Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with the heavenly choirs*

*And with all the faithful of every time and place,*

*who forever sing to the glory of your name: (Sanctus)*

You are holy, O God of majesty and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

Out of your great love for the world, you sent Jesus among us to set us free from the tyranny of evil.

He lived as one of us, sharing our joys and sorrows.

By his dying and rising, he releases us from bondage to sin.

We celebrate with joy the redemption won for us.

*Accept our expressions of praise and thanksgiving for us*

*to be a living and holy sacrifice, dedicated to your service:*

***Christ has died,***

***Christ is risen,***

***Christ will come again.***

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and unfermented wine,

That the bread we break and the cup we bless may be rich communion with you and with one another.

Lead us by the power of your Spirit to never deny by word or actions your claim on our lives.

Help us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you, O God.

Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. Give us strength and courage to serve you faithfully

Until the promised day of resurrection when with the redeemed of all the ages

We will feast with you at your table in glory.

Through Christ, all glory and honor are yours, Almighty God, with the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

And since you have opened the way for us to lift up our hearts to you, we are boldly praying now as our Lord Jesus has taught us saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night, for it is written,

‘I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

<sup>32</sup> “But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” <sup>33</sup> Peter said to him, “Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” <sup>35</sup> Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

<sup>69</sup> Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A female servant came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” <sup>70</sup> But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” <sup>71</sup> When he went out to the porch, another female servant saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus the Nazarene.” <sup>72</sup> Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.” <sup>73</sup> After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.” <sup>74</sup> Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock crowed. <sup>75</sup> Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.