

Denying Jesus: *John 18:1-27*

Norwalk Christian Church, March 4, 2018, Narrative Lectionary John Year, Lent 3, Year B

On Valentine's Day, February 14, 2018, at 2:19pm Eastern Standard Time, 19-year-old Nickolas Cruz arrived at his old school, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, after taking an Uber. He entered, carrying an AR-15 semi-automatic assault rifle, and extra magazines of ammo. He pulled the fire alarm. And as kids exited into the hallways, he began his massacre.

17 people killed. 3 staff members, 14 High School students. 16 wounded or injured.

It's heavy. It's hard. Maybe it's not what we wanted to talk about this morning. It makes us uncomfortable. It's been a few weeks. The news cycle has moved on to tweets and nuclear threats and the Oscars. When we call it back up, it's only to give fodder to our back and forth, talking-past-each-other debate about guns.

It's heavy. It's hard. Maybe it's not what we wanted to talk about this morning. But it *should* make us uncomfortable.

Because here we are, three weeks into Lent. We are in the middle of a penitent season, a season of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. We are preparing for new life--resurrection--and yet this season of Lent started with a reminder, that we are going to die. Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return, we said on Ash Wednesday. But we didn't need the ashes this year.

We saw the reminder live on TV. The Ash Wednesday massacre. Just hours before we walked into this church, Nicolas Cruz massacred his peers with a high-powered, flesh-ripping, organ-exploding weapon that you can legally buy for \$700 and accessorize at Bass Pro Shop in Altoona. We didn't need ashes this year.

It should make us uncomfortable. Lent is supposed to be uncomfortable. It's a season that calls us to confess, to lay bare the idols in our lives, those things that pull us away from the journey of Christ, the things in our lives--our world--that lead to death. Before we can live again, we must confront this culture of death in which we live.

In case we were under any allusions, the Jesus story is not a comfortable story. Did you hear our text this morning? Last week we were in John 12, several chapters ago, but it's only been a couple of days in Jesus' life. Since John 12, Jesus and his disciples gathered in an upper room. He washed their feet. "You are never to wash my feet," Peter proclaims, humiliated that his Master would scrub the scum off the soles of his feet.

"Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," Jesus says. And Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

And then they have a meal together, and Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me...It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.”

And Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, dips it in the dish of wine, and hands it to Judas. “What you must do, do quickly,” he says to Judas, and Judas leaves.

And then Jesus starts preaching. It’s a four-and-a-half chapter sermon. And the central point: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he continues. “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Peter interrupts the sermon, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.” Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

And then, Jesus keeps preaching.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments...Abide in me as I abide in you...abide in my love...This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

When Jesus finishes, he looks up and begins to pray to his Father, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

And then, well, then, it’s Chapter 18. This dark chapter: “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples...”

We know what happens. Judas betrays him, leads the authorities right to Jesus and gives them dirt they can use against him.

And Jesus just takes it. He allows it to happen. He could’ve stopped it. But he doesn’t.

Peter can’t believe what is happening. Peter who said, “Don’t wash *me*.” Who said, “I will lay down *my* life for you,” he can’t believe it. Jesus is just letting them take him. And Peter reaches for his sword and he cuts a slave named Malchus’ ear off. It was intended

as a warning strike. He thought Jesus would back him up, take Peter's cue, and then they'd all go to battle and massacre these men intent on murder.

But instead of fighting, Jesus rebukes Peter, who was only trying to defend them. Jesus rebukes him, and then puts the slave's ear back on.

And they arrest Jesus. And bind him. And his trial begins.

And Peter hides outside in the courtyard. He's despondent. What is happening? He can barely believe it. He would've killed for Jesus, and now they're going to kill Jesus. How could this happen to him? How could he *let* it happen to him?

"Aren't you also his disciple?" Someone asks. And Peter says, "I am not." **One.**

"You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" someone else said. "I am not." **Two**

Then one of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"

And Peter denies it. **Three.**

And at that moment the cock crowed.

How could he deny his master? How could he turn his back on Jesus?

Judas--well, his heart was hard. He was in it for himself. Judas--it makes sense.

But Peter, Peter who drank the water made into wine, Peter who saw the blind man who can now see, Peter who picked up baskets and baskets of leftover bread and fish, Peter who had a meal *with* Lazarus just days after Lazarus was dead--Peter, who said I will die for you--if he could deny him...what about us?

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

But that night was no time for love. That night was time for resistance. You've been betrayed Jesus, by one of your own! Do something. Don't love them--fight back!

But Jesus rebukes Peter's violence. He puts the ear back on Malchus. And he lets them take him. And they kill him. He willingly laid down his life for his friends. And he used one of final breaths to call out to God, asking God to forgive those who did this to him.

It should make us deeply uncomfortable.
Love should make us uncomfortable.

Jesus makes us uncomfortable.

Standing here, in the dust and ashes of this culture of violence that we have created, with our obsession with guns, and our rights, and our fear of the other, and our need to win the debate at any cost--Jesus preaches, "Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Abide in my life. Greater love has no one, than that one lay down one's life for one's friends."

And then, he lives out his sermon. He lays down his life.

For his friends. And also for his enemies.

It's not what we expected. This is not where we thought we were headed. But this is Jesus. This is his journey. And Jesus offers us an invitation--an invitation to follow and be healed. "Abide in my love," Jesus says. Live here. Lay down your culture of hate and violence, and put on my love. Try it on. Give it a chance--a chance to save you.

This is the invitation. This is Jesus.

Will we deny Jesus?

Or will we lay down whatever is in the way, and abide in his love?