

Sermon for Sunday, November 15, 1970 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"BRYLCREME CHRISTIANS"

St. Matthew 26:26-35

Text: "Peter declared to him, 'Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.'" St. Matthew 26:33, 34

Our scripture this morning described for us the last meal Jesus was to have with his disciples before his crucifixion. His three year ministry had only a few hours to run. In those final hours he spoke to his disciples of his coming death. He told them that they would desert and deny him. The Bible puts it this way, "And then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away because of me this night...'"

That stung the disciples! It cut their pride to the quick. Peter especially was hurt by the accusation. He cried out, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." "Yes," said Peter, "You can count on me. I will stick to you to the end. It doesn't matter what happens or how tough things get, there is one of your disciples who will stand with you to the last. And it will be I, Peter." This was Peter at his impetuous best--outspoken, brash, and full of good and noble intentions.

But I would like to read for you another passage of scripture. It is a passage about brave and faithful Peter. The event it records is only a few hours later. We simply turn the page of our Bibles and we come to this, "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.' And immediately the cock crew."

What happened to brave Peter? What happened to the courage of that brave man who had climbed over the side of a boat one day to walk to his master? Surely he had never intended to deny Jesus. Yet, on that cold and dreadful night as he squatted by the fire in the courtyard of the High Priest, something happened to him. It was as though the words were wrenched from his lips unbidden and unwanted, "Woman, I know not the man." The Bible says that when the cock crew and Peter remembered how he had claimed he would never deny Jesus, he wept. Yes, suddenly his courage and his good intentions lay shattered at his feet, watered by the tears of his failure.

Do you feel any identification with Peter? Isn't it true of all of us that we have the best intentions of being faithful to Jesus? But let me ask you, have you really been faithful? If I'm really honest, I have to admit my failures--I have to confess to words that slipped out unbidden, some dark thoughts that caught me unawares, some unkind deed done that I can't undo. Yes, I want to be faithful to Jesus, but in my heart I can hear that rooster crowing and I'll bet you can hear him, too. Like Peter, I mean well by Jesus but when I think about what I am really like, like him I want to sit down and cry.

Why do things like this happen to people like Peter, people like me, and

people like you? What's wrong with us? Well, our problem is that we are bryl-creme Christians. We have only a dab of religion. A little dab of dressing may be all we need for our hair, but we need more than a little dab of Jesus for our hearts.

See how it worked for Peter. He found out that a little dab of love for Jesus wouldn't do. Now, Peter really loved Jesus. After the resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples one day and he said to Peter, "Peter, lovest thou me?" "Yea, Lord," came the reply, "Thou knowest that I love thee." This was no new-born love. It had its birth along dusty road when they walked and talked together. It was a love that came into being as he watched that gentle and loving face filled with compassion for the poor, the sick, the lame. It was a love born in agony as he watched the tears wrung from the eyes of Christ as he wept over a city that had denied and rejected him. Yes, Peter loved Jesus, but there was just one problem-- He did not love him above all else; he did not love him more than life itself. It was brylcreme love.

Do you love Jesus? One of our hymns is entitled, "My Jesus, I Love Thee." It goes like this: "I love thee, because Thou has first loved me, And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree, I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow; If ever I loved thee, My Jesus, 'tis now." Do you love Jesus like that? Once Jesus said, that a man must put him before father and mother and wife and children, yes, and even his own life, or as Jesus put it, "He cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) Do you really love Jesus like that? Or is yours a brylcreme love, too?

Notice secondly that Peter had a brylcreme loyalty. He didn't know it at the time and when Jesus said, "you will all fall away because of me this night..." it challenged Peter's loyalty. Can't you just see his face turn red and his eyes flash as he thumps himself on the chest and says, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." But there in the courtyard that night, with danger and the threat of death charging the air like electricity, Peter found out he had a brylcreme loyalty. When his life was at stake a little dab of loyalty wasn't enough.

How loyal are you to Jesus? Ogden Nash wrote jestingly, "Why is it the children pour molasses on the cat's back when the very thing we tell them not to do is pour molasses on the cat's back." Challenge kids to do something and even if they hadn't thought of it until you mentioned it, they are bound and determine that they will do it. So Jesus challenges us to live a better life, to put our hand to the plow and not look back, to take up our cross and follow him. He challenges us to the greatest adventure in human experience--the challenge to live for him. But let me ask you, how well have you succeeded in being loyal to Jesus? Has it turned out that you are a brylcreme Christian there as well?

Notice thirdly that Peter had a brylcreme enthusiasm, too. Peter lived in exciting days for all of human history stood at a turning point. One day, caught up in enthusiasm, Peter had cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Yes, eternal truths were breaking in on human history, the Son of God had been made flesh and dwelt among men and Peter was gripped by his enthusiasm. But when the going got tough and the price got high, Peter's enthusiasm evaporated



and he was a brylcreme Christian after all. The Bible says, "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.' And immediately the cock crowed."

Have you taken the pulse of your enthusiasm lately? Actually, there is a certain enthusiasm here in Central right now because the congregation has a new preacher and the preacher has a new congregation. Where will our enthusiasm be a year from now, five years from now, ten years from now? What happens to enthusiasm when you have to keep on keeping on, when the going gets tough, and the job gets difficult? Is ours a brylcreme enthusiasm?

Peter found out that brylcreme religion wasn't enough. I would like to share with you why it wasn't enough because brylcreme religion will fail us, too. First, brylcreme religion wouldn't do because Peter underestimated the future. He couldn't imagine that the future would hold anything so fearful as a crown of thorns; anything so terrible as a cut and bleeding back; anything so dreadful as being nailed to a cross. He never dreamed that fear, like the taste of bile in his mouth, could ravage his soul; he never dreamed that terror would lay its cold, clammy hand upon his heart; he never dreamed that the threat of pain or punishment or death could rip the courage out of his heart. No, a little dab wouldn't do him because he underestimated the future.

This happens to us. Life turns out to be far more serious and difficult than we had expected. We think bad things happen to other people only to discover they happen to us, too. The valleys turn out to be deeper, the shadows more dark, the road more steep than we had ever dreamed. The policeman rings our doorbell and says, "There has been an accident." The surgeon tells us, "I'm sorry but it is inoperable." The telegram from the War Department that starts, "We regret to inform you..." is addressed to us. Some of you already know and all of us will discover that the future is far harder than we ever dreamed--ask a divorcee, ask the bereaved parents, ask the lonely widow, ask the father of a retarded child, ask the family of an alcoholic, ask the man who has lost what he worked a life-time to gain. Brylcreme religion isn't enough.

Notice secondly that Peter over-estimated himself. Did you catch the pronoun in his speech to Jesus? "I will never fall away." His name meant "the rock". Yet, when the chips were down and the pay-off came we read, "...he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'" He thought that whatever happened he could make it on his own. But he overestimated himself.

Given the right set of circumstances any one of us here this morning can be cracked and broken. We may think we are strong of soul and stout of heart; we may think that disaster and trouble will not make our faith waver; but if we are brylcreme Christians we have overestimated ourselves. There will come a time when the news is bad, when death enters the door, when pain and hurt come and at a time like that a little dab of God isn't enough.

A third reason that Peter failed was because he got cut off from Jesus. As long as Jesus was there, it was easy for Peter to have faith in the future and in himself. He had even dared to walk across troubled waters because the hand of Jesus was stretched out to catch him. But listen to Peter when he is cut off from the presence of Jesus, "He began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'" Peter never realized how much he depended on the presence of Jesus for his faith and courage until Jesus was gone.

How much love, how much loyalty, how much enthusiasm do you have for Jesus--are you a brylcreme Christian? What will you do when you have underestimated the future and it turns out to be more terrible than you had dreamed? What will you do when you have overestimated yourself and you find you are not as strong as you thought?

Would you like to know the secret of living a successful Christian life? Would you like to know how not to be a brylcreme Christian? The secret of the Christian faith is this: never let yourself get cut off from the presence of Jesus. That is the incredible claim of the Bible--the claim that we can know the presence of the living Christ. It is the incredible assertion that we can know the presence of a resurrected Jesus. It is the astonishing claim that each of us can walk with Jesus.

Either this claim is gloriously true or the whole of the Christian faith is built on a lie. Either this claim is marvelously valid or the Church is guilty of a cruel hoax and the New Testament rests on an incredible falsehood.

The world today does not so much need better moral codes, good ethical systems, fine teachings, new insights into life. No, what we need most of all is an inward presence, a friend, someone who loves us, and who, in the midst of the worst that life can do supports and sustains us.

We don't have to be brylcreme Christians to fail. Peter, with the inward presence of Jesus in his heart, never failed again. Tradition has it that when the Christians in Rome were being terribly persecuted, Peter went there to give his life for Jesus. He asked to be crucified with his head down because he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner his Lord had died.

I do not know what the future holds for any of us. I do not know what strengths or weaknesses we carry into life. But I do know that without the presence of the living Jesus, without the inward reality of a friend who loves us, even the strongest of us shall ultimately fail. Whoever you are this morning, there is a promise for you--not the promise of a brylcreme religion, but the promise of Jesus who offers himself to you and who says to you, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." You can have his presence right this moment by simply offering him your life and by faith asking him to rule your heart. As some poet has put it,

No distant Lord have I,  
Loving afar to be,  
Made flesh for me he cannot rest  
Until he rests in me.

O glorious Son of God,  
Incarnate Deity,  
I shall forever be with thee  
Because thou art with me.