

Sermon for Sunday, June 3, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN YOU TRIP OVER YOUR OWN FEATS"

St. Matthew 26:26-35

Text: "Peter said to him, 'Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.'
And so said all the disciples." St. Matthew 26:35

Do you usually set out deliberately to do something bad or wrong? Well, neither do I. Yet, I discover that in spite of my good intentions about life, too often I end up doing the wrong thing. Is that your experience, too? For example, when you joined the church or at some point in your life when you made a recommitment to Jesus, you intended to make a new start and be a better person. There were some old habits you meant to get rid of and some bad patterns you meant to dump. Yet, there came a day, quite unintentionally, when you lost your temper or when you did or said some ugly thing. Quite unexpectedly it slipped out unbidden and you had done the very thing you meant never to do. And you discovered you had tripped over your own feats.

So we discover in life that not only are we not as good as we can be, we are not even as good as we try to be. The disciples of Jesus had the same problem. Once, late in the ministry of Jesus when his days were fast drawing to a close, he spoke to the disciples of his coming death and he told them how they would deny him and desert him. He said, "You will all fall away because of me this night..." Well, that wounded their pride! They were not quitters! They had already been with him during persecution and rejection and ridicule. Now their loyalty had been challenged and Peter especially was stung to the quick. In hot denial he cries out, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Then the Bible adds, "And so said all the disciples." "Yes," they said, "we will stick with you to the bitter end. No matter what disaster comes, what calamity strikes, we will be there to share it with you." Jesus could count on these men, for nothing could ever make them desert him. Yet, we turn the page and we come to this, "They all forsook him and fled."

The disciples tripped over their own feats. Peter especially had bragged how he would die rather than desert Jesus. Yet, only a few hours after he had boasted of his loyalty, we read of him, "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know that man.' And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly." Yes, Peter had good intentions, but he tripped over his own feats. He never intended to deny Jesus. He never intended to curse and swear and say he never knew him. As he squatted by the fire that cold and dreadful night his best intentions suddenly evaporated in fear. The words were wrenched unbidden from his lips, "Woman, I do not know the man." And Peter lay sprawled in the shattered fragments of his best intentions. He had tripped over his own feats.

And why do you suppose Peter tripped? And why do you suppose it is that we share his failure? Peter never intended to let Jesus down for he had the best intentions. First of all he truly loved Jesus. Do you remember how the Gospel of John tells of Jesus' conversation with his disciples after the resurrection? There on the beach that day he questioned Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," came the reply, "You know that I love you." This was no sudden, new-born love. No, it had been born along dusty roads when they walked and talked together. It was a love born midst the multitudes as Jesus taught and blessed and healed. It was a love born as he watched that gentle, loving face filled with compassion for the poor, the sick, and 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 him. Yes, Peter loved Jesus. Loved him with all of his heart. So he never intended to deny Jesus because he loved him.

Isn't that basically true of us this morning? Basically we love Jesus, too. One of our hymns sums it up for us very well. It's entitled, "My Jesus, I love Thee," and it goes, "I love thee, because Thou has first loved me, And purchased my pardon On Calvery's tree I love thee for wearing The thorns on thy brow; If ever I love thee, My Jesus, 'tis now." Yes, we love him, too, for what he did for us on the cross and for what he does for us day by day. No, we--like Peter--never intended to betray Jesus and deny him with our sins, because basically we love him.

But, secondly, Peter had good intentions because his loyalty had been challenged. 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!" Children--including us adult type--are like that. Dare us to do a thing and we are bound and determined that we will do it. So Jesus had challenged the loyalty of Peter--"you will all fall away because of me this night." And Peter had responded, "Not I, Lord. Everybody else may fail you, but I never will."

And haven't we felt that same sense of challenge? Jesus challenges us to live a better life, to take our cross and follow him. He challenges us to the greatest adventure in human experience, to venture to faith, to live by the Spirit. He dares us to put our trust in him and to commit ourselves to his keeping. So--like Peter--we never intend to deny Jesus because our loyalty, our faithfulness, has been challenged and we are determined not to trip.

But then thirdly, Peter had the best intentions because he was caught in the enthusiasm of the moment. Those were great, exciting days. It was a time of adventure for all of human history stood at a turning point. It was an enthusiast: Peter who had cried out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And he had been so excited to be a part of what God was doing.

Isn't that true here at Central? We are aware that God is doing great and exciting things here. We see lives being changed, families being transformed, young people following Jesus. And how exciting it is to be a part of all of that. We are full of enthusiasm and excitement and like Peter, we are determined that we will never curse and swear and deny Jesus.

Yes, Peter had the best of intentions. He truly loved Jesus, his loyalty had been challenged, he was caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment and he intended to do great deeds and perform great feats. Yet, a rooster crowed that bitter morning and Peter had tripped over his own feats.

Let me suggest several reasons Peter tripped. First, he underestimated the future. He did not imagine the future could hold anything as fearful as a crown of thorns or anything so terrible as a cut and bleeding back; or anything so dreadful as the ominous threat of a cruel cross. He never dreamed that fear, like a black taste of bile in his mouth, could bring him to quivering denial. He never dreamed that the threat of pain and punishment and death could rip the courage from his breast and leave him trembling helplessly. He tripped over his own feats because he underestimated the future.

So with us. So often things do not turn out as we had hoped or expected. Life turns out to be far more serious and far more difficult than we had expected. The valleys turn out to be deeper and the shadows more dark and the way more hard than we had ever dreamed. Sickness, death and calamity; grief, pain, and sorrow--all turn out to be far worse than we had anticipated. We discover the future is often so much more difficult than we had expected and we trip over our failures because we underestimated it.

But secondly, Peter went sprawling because he overestimated himself. Remember what he said to Jesus that night? Remember the important little pronoun? "Yet will I never be offended," he said. Peter was the leader of the disciples and his name meant "the Rock". Surely he would never fail! Yet when the show-down came when the chips were down and the die was cast, that gallant determination turned into trembling denial. "Then," says the Bible, "he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man!"

You may think you are strong and stout of heart. You may think that disaster and trouble will not make your faith falter and waver. But do not overestimate yourself. Today is Pentecost Sunday in which we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit to the people of God. There came a time when Peter needed a courage and a faith and a strength greater than his own to lean on. There came a time when Peter needed a resource of power greater than he had himself. He had thought himself self-sufficient only to discover his heart was bankrupt of courage.

Oh! Do not leave God out of your good intentions. There will come a time when your own strength fails, when your own courage melts, when your own faith breaks and then you will need a power in your life greater than your own. 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, you will need a resource of power greater than your own. No, don't over-estimate yourself. There is a hymn we sing, "I need thee, O I need thee; ever hour I need thee." No matter how good our intentions, the time will come when we need God's power and God's strength, and God's courage.

Finally, notice that Peter tripped up because he was cut off from Jesus. As long as Jesus was there, it was easy to have a faith in himself and in the future. With Jesus there, he had no fear. He had even dared once to walk on the water to meet his master one stormy night. But when he was cut off from Jesus we find him cursing and swearing and denying his Lord. He had never realized how much the presence of Jesus meant to his faith and courage until Jesus was gone. Without Jesus, he tripped and fell sprawling over his own feats.

I do not know what the future holds for you or me, but I do know this: I know neither of us will be able to handle it very well without Jesus. I do not know what strength or weakness of character either of us carries into life, but I know that without Jesus even the strongest of us will fail. There have been times in my life when my own strength and courage failed and without Jesus I would have perished. You may have had those same experiences. If not, they will come--as they come to all of us. Jesus is calling you this morning. Midst the tumult of life, midst the storms that lie ahead, Jesus is calling you to follow him. And whoever you are, his promise comes to you, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." You see, you may trip over your own feats, but if your hand is in his, he will never let you fall.