

# Ekklesia

March 22, 2018



Joni Lovegrove catches a breathtakingly beautiful sunrise.

## Sunday Worship: Friday

Our walk through Holy Week during this Lenten season is drawing to its climax. On Wednesday evening we will gather around the Table to reflect again on the solemn moment in the life of Jesus when he broke bread with the disciples, and then we will leave the upper room and stay with him as he prays for strength for the turmoil that lies ahead of him. On Sunday morning we will go with him through trial, judgment, scourging and finally, death on the cross. The days are indeed weighty, calling us to reflect on what all of us would probably agree are the most significant moments in the Christian faith. Despite how central Jesus' death on the cross is for us, however, we cannot begin to understand its significance apart from his life. Jesus' death on the cross, Marcus Borg and John Dominick Crossan alerted us as we started out on our Lenten pilgrimage, was the direct result of his life. His passion for the wide justice and welcome of the Kingdom of God led him into conflict with the imperial and religious powers of his day and resulted in his second Passion on the cross.

This Sunday we will again focus on the clashes of power that surrounded Jesus and led to his death. Saying that Mark and the other writers of Christian scripture assign providential meanings to Jesus' death is not the same as saying that God willed Jesus' death and that "it had to happen that way." The questions of *who* killed Jesus and *why* he died go beyond matters of simple orthodoxy. They raise significant questions about the world in which we live and our own sense of passion in how we live our lives. Join us Sunday as we seek to uncover some answers that can help guide us into the future. Text: Mark 15:1-20, 25-39.

## Prayer Concerns

Please remember **the family of Sue Stansbury**, who was a good friend of Marjorie and Connor Matthews; **Mary Harris**, who is ill at home; **Gerry Morris' brother Sam**, who is scheduled for a medical procedure on April 2<sup>nd</sup>; **Zoë Maxwell**; **Kim, a friend of the**

**Dipboyes and her family**, following word that treatment options have been exhausted; **Gladys Arthur**; **Stacy Duke**, co-pastor of Ann Arbor First Baptist Church, as she goes through radiation treatment; Linda Doyle's friend, **Brenda Rasch**, whose husband and father are seriously ill; **Flo Plemmons' sister, Alline, and her sisters-in-law, Ginny and Deva**; Joni Lovegrove's friend, **Laura Bultman**, who is seriously ill; **Douglas Ladd**, who is undergoing chemotherapy; **Bob Latellier**, a friend of Marjorie Matthews; Marjorie Matthew's friend, **Emily Copenhaver**; **Chet Griffin**, as he undergoes radiation treatments; **Lois Vandagriff**; **Frances Neal**; **Jane Matthews**, Connor Matthews' mother; **Linda Doyle's niece and her husband**; **John Moyers**, who is in the Shannondale health care facility in Knoxville; **John Lotsey**, a friend of the Parrishes; **Mary McReynolds**, Terri Gilbert's mother, who is at The Courtyards; **Rita Day**, Susan Parrish's friend, whose grandson **John** is critically ill; **David Fleming**, a friend of the Parrishes; **Harvey Senger**, Rodney Parrish's uncle.

## Wednesday Meal: Covered Dish

Next Wednesday's dinner will be covered dish. We will provide ham and cheese grits casserole. Please bring something to help finish out the meal. Please note below that the meal will be at 5 p.m. before we go upstairs for the Communion service.

## Maundy Communion

As we have done in previous years, we will have our Maundy Communion service on Wednesday. We will share our meal in Fellowship Hall and then go upstairs for the service at 6:15 p.m.

## Easter Sunday Lunch

Following our service Easter Sunday morning (April 1), we will gather for lunch downstairs with our friends from LUAPA as our guests. The meal will be prepared and no one will need to bring anything other than themselves. Please do sign up at church this Sunday morning or Wednesday evening so that we will have a good count of those we can expect.

## Congregational Meeting

We will have a Congregational Meeting in Fellowship Hall at 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 4. Please be present as we give consideration to several important matters concerning the ministry of our church.

## Women's Interfaith Dialogue

Women's Interfaith Dialogue's next meeting will not be on the first Monday of the month, but due to scheduling conflicts, on the second Monday, April 9, at the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge.

## Centering Prayer Group

The Centering Prayer Group gathers in the chapel every Sunday morning from 9:45 to 10:30 a.m. Newcomers are welcome.

## Calendar

### Weekly GCC Calendar

**Sun:** 9:45a—Centering Prayer      10:30a—Fellowship      11:00a—Worship      1:30p—LUAPA  
**Wed:** 5:00 p.m.—Thoughts and Prayers      5:45 p.m.—Dinner      7:00 p.m.—Grace Chorale  
 Sundays    Iglesia Apostolica worship service (1:30 p.m.)    Thursday evenings/Saturday—Iglesia Apostolica service & music practice

**March 28** Maundy Communion Service (6:15 p.m.)  
**April 1** Easter Morning Service followed by lunch in Fellowship Hall  
**April 4** Congregational Meeting (5:00 p.m. in Fellowship Hall)

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## Deserters Anonymous

Sermon

March 18, 2018

Mark 14:17-27, 66-72

Larry Dipboye

A New York Times bestseller in the early 1970's, *The Peter Principle* by Laurence J. Peter dropped a humor bomb into the battle for success that was afflicting the population surge known as baby-boomers. Coordinator of Programs for Emotionally Disturbed Children and Associate Prof. of Education at the University of Southern California, Peters had a message for people at the bottom levels of the social ladder. He explained why incompetence is at the root of everything we endeavor to do—why schools bestow ignorance, why governments condone anarchy, why courts dispense injustice, why prosperity causes unhappiness, and why utopian plans never generate utopias. Professor Peter's unforgettable formula for failure was an exposé of the corporate rat race: "In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence." The self-styled "hierarchiologist" pulled back the curtain on our lust for success: "Democracy is the process by which the people are free to choose the man who will get the blame." "Equal

opportunity means everyone will have a fair chance at being incompetent.” “If you don’t know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else.” “Competence, like truth, beauty and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder.” When we get so dead serious about our position on the totem pole, laughter is not only the best medicine; I suspect that laughter carries the best wisdom.

Prof. Laurence J. Peter and the Apostle Simon Peter seem to have more in common than a name. Simon became Peter in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus changed his name to *Petros*, “rock,” as Jesus identified the rock, *petra*, on which he would build his church. The confession of Jesus as the Christ was Simon’s great moment. He leaped ahead of the pack and became the revered CEO of the church. The Roman Church has through the centuries embraced Peter as the first pope, but Protestants were certain that Peter was an incompetent from the beginning. Peter rose to his level of incompetence when he resisted the cross of Christ that brought down the reprimand from Jesus, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Thursday of Holy Week, the day before the crucifixion, begins with the disciples’ preparation for the Passover meal, followed by the Gethsemane prayer and the arrest and first trial of Jesus. Friday, the crucifixion, is on the horizon. Every hour of Thursday is prelude to the crisis which is about to dawn. It was the first day of the Passover celebration of Jewish salvation, the Exodus. The new Passover centered on the new meaning of unleavened bread and the sacrificial lamb, now symbols of the death of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper.

The Twelve were not only witnesses of Thursday events, they were also actors in the subplot that runs throughout the story. It begins at the table with the exposure of Judas as betrayer followed by a chorus from the others of “Surely, not I?” After the meal Jesus declares, “You will all become deserters.” Peter stays in character as the outspoken disciple: “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” Then there is the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus as the inner circle—Peter, James, and John—keep falling asleep. Judas arrives for the arrest followed by the trial before the high priest. Thursday’s drama ends with Peter’s denial and his memory of the warning from Jesus, “‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.”

**Failure is a major teacher in life for all of us.** *The Peter Principle* caught on because it exposed the mythology behind our drive to succeed. Failure to succeed is a real part of the real world that every real person experiences. Prof. Peter was like the child watching the royal parade who was honest enough to say, “the emperor has no clothes.” He popped the bubble we call success and reminded us of some of the values we hold in life that are frauds. You can substitute the word *sin*. While we tend to identify sin with malice or evil intentions, the favorite Greek word in the New Testament *hamartia* means “missing the mark,” “falling short,” or, yes, “failure.” The biblical wisdom that reaches deep into the Hebrew experience with life is that sin is universal. Both failure to succeed and failure to achieve the holy life share a common path inclusive of every last one of us. Paul said it best: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That word includes the people at the top.

The Gospels call them “the Twelve” or “the disciples.” They left families, friends, and jobs to follow Jesus. They were later called apostles, meaning *sent*, sent into the world as ambassadors of the gospel of Christ. They eventually would become the leaders that were succeeded by bishops in the church. It appears that hierarchy is unavoidable in human communities. Even the church from the earliest stages had lower and upper classes, regardless of how much Acts insists that they shared in common. Every family and every community contains leaders and followers. All disciples are followers of Christ, but Jesus reminded aspiring generals that he came among us as a servant. John’s version of the Lord’s Supper has Jesus washing the feet of disciples.

But the followers had a problem with following. Perhaps Peter protested the way of the cross for Jesus because he could not stand the thought of following a loser. I have come to despise that word. Winners are usually measured by economic or athletic achievement, superficial beauty, or a title before the name or letters after the name. Losers are the people winners use to get to the top of the ladder of success. When the Twelve got into an ego contest, Jesus had to remind them that the one they call “Lord” came among them as a servant and that his hierarchy is upside down, the first is last and the last is first.

The “prosperity gospel” in America has been around for more than a century. It is the belief that financial wealth and good health are blessings from God for all who claim God-given success. It has sometimes been called the “American gospel” as proclaimed by Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth* and Russell Conwell’s famous sermon “Acres of Diamonds.” Conwell equated poverty with sin and asserted that anyone could become rich through hard work. It is also a legacy of our Puritan roots that divided the world into the chosen and the damned. Chosenness, of course, was measured by external evidence of success.

What a contrast to the gospel of Christ! Lent is a season of penance, of contrition for sin. The dictionary calls it “self-mortification.” That may be an accurate description of what the church has done with Lent, but I seriously doubt that wallowing in guilt serves a valid purpose with Peter. Penance is a time to “get real,” a moment of truth, of honesty with God and self. You can bluff your way to the top of the ladder of success, but you cannot bluff your way through the obstacle course posed by human limitations common to all of us. The truth in this story is that Peter failed, just like the others, just like the rest of us. His failure may have been more visible and blatant. Peter hears the cock crow and suddenly hears the truth about himself—that he is as flawed as the others.

The contrast between Peter and Judas is unavoidable. Hear the gospel message to every disciple: So you failed. Face it, and deal with it. You don’t have to destroy yourself. If Peter could continue to grow from here, so can you. Everyone fails, but not everyone

learns from failure.

**The blame game becomes a smoke screen for our own failure.** Judas managed to hold the title “betrayed” in the Gospels. Matthew stands Judas side-by-side with Peter and reports that Judas repented, attempted to give back the blood money taken for the identification of Jesus, and finally hanged himself. The failed humanity of the Twelve comes out in the blame game that follows the crucifixion. I do not subscribe to biblical inerrancy because the whole idea contradicts the theological anthropology of the Bible. Anything touched by human hands is capable of corruption and failure in this world.

The early Christians, led by the Apostles, made a scapegoat of Judas to carry their guilt into his suicide, or in Acts, his horrible death from a fall. There is a real possibility that Judas might have been trying to start the revolution he thought was necessary for the Kingdom of God, rather than to destroy Jesus. Numerous interpreters have taken note of the implications of his revolutionary spirit in his name that could be a sign of his radical anti-Roman politics.

If you are paying attention, Mark breaks through the iron conduit of the traditional blame game to expose enough blame to go around to the whole group. Peter steps up as the voice of the disciples in his declaration of absolute loyalty, but Mark reports, “all of them said the same.” Peter, James, and John follow to Gethsemane and fall asleep on their watch. When the high priest arrives with his mob, one disciple, John identifies as Peter, draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the priest’s servant. But Mark notes a moment of truth when “all of them deserted him and fled.”

After the disciples had fled, Mark alone reports a mystery disciple in 51-52, “a certain young man,” who was apprehended by the soldiers. They grabbed his only clothing, a linen cloth, perhaps bed clothing; and he “ran off naked.” Some see this as Mark’s signature. Tradition held that Mark, a young disciple, received his information from Peter. Mark may have been the mystery disciple, the only one there to tell the story, the only one still present. But Mark used the same word, *fled*. He too, fled in the face of death.

The first Christians blamed Judas. Later Christians wrongly blamed the Jews, while current theologians attribute the crucifixion to Rome. Mark does not report the death of Judas but is inclusive of the failure of the Twelve including himself. Mark reminds us that at the arrest and trial that Peter ascended to his highest “level of incompetence.”

Like other tyrants of history, Hitler thought he had the answer to the problem of a flawed humanity. He exterminated the imperfect in German institutions for the insane, nursing homes, and the mentally and physically disabled—a total of 70,273 counted patients and children at the time of the program’s closure in 1941 under pressure from a Catholic bishop and world opinion. Hitler cited the exemplary “eugenics” philosophy in the U.S. to support his policy of perfection.

**The gospel of forgiveness and redemption is for losers like us.** William Martin, sociology professor at Rice University, wrote the only authorized biography of Billy Graham in 1991, *A Prophet with Honor*. The biography is gracious and respectful, but not uncritical. As a sociologist, Martin brought some insight into human behavior to his work. He understood the problem of class and models for success and failure in society. Martin identified Graham’s primary attraction in preaching the transforming power of the second chance. In the face of failure, God is pure grace. The good news of salvation is forgiveness, not perfection—acceptance, not dominance.

Peter’s story is remembered in the Gospels for a reason. We might read it as the ultimate success story. Peter did indeed become the CEO of the church, but not because he was the winner and all the rest were losers. Just like all the rest of us, he rose to his level of incompetence. There he found the forgiving grace of God, the very God we meet at the Table.

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