

Many Scripture scholars interpret today's gospel – Peter's 3-fold profession of love for Jesus as the reversal of his 3-fold denial of Jesus as Jesus stood – accused – before Annas, the high priest, on the night before he died. There are two things I would like to draw out of this story for our reflection today.

The first is this. How very fortunate it is for us that the account of Peter's failure – his denial of Jesus – was not edited out of the gospels when they were put in their final form. It's fortunate because this makes Peter a much more believable character: the story of our faith is very much the same as Peter's. *Denial* and *redemption* are integral parts of the story of our faith; and *forgiveness* is the factor that transforms one into the other. The idea that one of Jesus' chosen followers – one of his very closest friends – could deny Jesus and still be involved in the story of the church – as the top man no less – is not the kind of justice we are accustomed to today. The story presented to us in Scripture is not a whitewashed, antiseptic version of reality. Peter *the denier* becomes Peter *the fearless proclaimer* of the good news of the risen Christ. That's what Easter faith can do! Denial and redemption are integral parts of the story of our faith; and forgiveness is the bridge: forgiveness transforms one into the other: *denial of Christ* into *redemption by Christ*. This is an especially important message for us these days – as all of our church's dirty laundry is hung out there for the whole world to see. The message of this gospel is that we, too, can change our *denial of Christ* – whether at the personal level or at the church-wide level – into *redemption by Christ*. Forgiveness is the bridge: it transforms one into

the other. An encounter with the risen Christ has the power to transform the lives of otherwise weak persons, or weak churches, into fearless proclaimers of the resurrection; in Jesus it is possible to find forgiveness for even the worst of sins, and to make a new beginning.

The second reflection point is the bold statement of Peter in the first reading: “We must obey God rather than men.” Peter and the other disciples were engaged in acts of disobedience against the Sanhedrin – the religious authority of the day. They had been strictly ordered not to preach; yet, they went right on preaching and teaching and healing and tending Jesus’ sheep with ever-increasing boldness. With the Spirit to empower them, and to testify on their behalf, they chose obedience to God, rather than to human beings.

This lays the foundation for the principle of freedom of conscience – one of the most misunderstood concepts there is. Most people think that freedom of conscience means they can do whatever they want. It’s nothing more than a way of rationalizing their own desires and wants. Nothing is further from the truth. Freedom of conscience means obedience to God and to God’s law as the highest authority for all our actions. When we are faced with a moral dilemma, the question we always have to ask ourselves is this: what does it mean for me to be obedient to God in this situation? What is God’s law? What is God’s will?

For Jesus, being obedient to God meant death on the cross – freely accepting the most bitter cup of suffering.

For the apostles, being obedient to God meant that they would be subjected to the same persecution as Jesus had been. Earlier, Jesus had warned them that this would happen: because of their discipleship, they would be seized and persecuted, handed over to synagogues and to prisons, led before governors and kings, and, in the end, be put to death. Luke says: the apostles left the Sanhedrin, “rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.”

If we are truly obedient to God today, we have to expect the same kind of treatment. Can we rejoice, and can our church rejoice, at being found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name?