***Sermon Text for January 19, 2014***

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

*Numbers 21:4-9, John 18:15-18, 25-28*

*“The Cost of Discipleship”*

I love this year’s confirmation class. I mean, I love all of them, but this year it seems like we have kids who are willing to talk and say how they feel and put things into context that is very refreshing. We took our yearly trip to LCBC yesterday and as always we analyze it and one of the youth said, it just seems like they make having faith in Jesus Christ like anything else. It is almost too easy to be a disciple. What’s so hard about being a disciple of Jesus Christ? On this Martin Luther King weekend we realize that it could actually demand your life.

Today we find Peter confronted by three different accusers. And in what could have been his shining moment became his darkest and most difficult hour. Each time he is approached in these verses he denies and emphatically that he was a disciple of Jesus Christ. We see how much easier it is and how it comes so naturally to us to deny our Savior rather than face the truth and the cost of discipleship and its apparent unappealing consequences.

This very famous scene in John reminds us that the cost of discipleship is not cheap. When we are faced with a decision between admitting and claiming our allegiance to Christ are we willing to pay the cost, or do we take the easy way out and deny him?

Some of you have heard of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was arrested by Hitler because of his complicity in a plot to kill the dictator and as a result was executed at a very, very young age of 39. He wrote an inspired book called the Cost of Discipleship. In it he defines discipleship through the lens of the sermon on the Mount and he makes the statement: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” When Christ calls someone, or to make it personal, When Christ calls you, he bids you to come and die.

Our first Scripture we find the people of Israel newly freed from their slavery in Egypt and making their way to the promised land where instead of rejoicing about their freedom they are complaining about the food and the water. We could safely say that their threshold for the cost of their discipleship was fairly low. We are willing to be your discipleship, but only if it means that we can live a certain lifestyle with at least a minimal amount of the amenities that we expect.

In John when we last left Peter he had courageously or brazenly cut off the ear of one of the soldiers trying to arrest Jesus. Well done, we were saying, we were cheering him on, I would have done something like that if I were him. Now that’s a real disciple of Jesus. Then Jesus scolds him and tells him to put away his sword. The scene ends with Jesus being arrested and the darkness of the night seems to be all that remains.

A week or so ago I was taking the girls to school and it was that morning when there was a lot of snow on the ground, and it was really, really dangerous. We went the back road and got out of town and were making our way to the bridge and got over the bridge when I noticed a car that had slid and a woman got out to inspect it. I kept going but Bethany said, dad, shouldn’t we help? Uh, yes, I guess we should, so I slowed down as I passed her and said, do you need help? I could tell she needed help, but I now got stuck and couldn’t make it up the hill, and SUV was coming directly at me and honking on his horn, unable to stop. He squeezed, sliding down the hid, with about 2 inches to spare from hitting my mirror.

I made it up and pulled off in front of the barn there, ran down the hill and told the woman to get in the passenger seat, I would take her over the bridge in her car and then run back to my car. There was a little boy in the back with his eyes wide open. We started up the bridge, and I tell you, we were literally all over the road, going sideways, those tires had absolutely no tread. The whole time she was literally screaming, Oh My…, I mean screaming, we came down the bridge and a car was coming toward us and I had the wheel turned the opposite way as the car was moving hoping the wheels would catch, and they did and I pulled into Rineers. She was shaking but her husband was on the way. I ran over the bridge and we made it to school.

That may have been a bit of what Peter was feeling as he goes from his very familiar place of prayer, the Garden of Gethsemane, to the courtyard of the High Priest, but in reverse. Dangerous, unfamiliar territory. Follow along in the first 3 verses and you see that Peter is such an outsider that he can’t even get in to the courtyard but had to hang out by the gate.

But fortunately one of the disciples knew someone and did get in. There is a legend that the disciple who got in was John because he and his father Zebedee and his brothers provided the fish for the high priest’s house.

At verse 17 the woman who let him in at the gate is the first one to ask those three questions, or what I said earlier, she is the first to make an accusation to Peter. But I say that this one is completely different from the other two. This one is far less threatening and gives Peter a chance to answer truthfully. “You are not also one of this guy’s disciple are you?” Why also, why did she say also? Well if he is with John, and everybody knew John, the fish guy, they knew he was also a Jesus follower, they were also okay with that, then wink wink, are you also a disciple like this guy next to you?

Peter denies it using the exact opposite of Jesus’ claim earlier. Remember earlier in the chapter when they come to arrest him and he says who are you looking for, and he saying I am he? Ego Eimi, Peter in return when he is asked if he was a disciple says consistently Ouk Eimi, not me, that’s not me, wrong guy. Peter, be careful what you say because the cost of discipleship can be pretty steep. But no one calls him on it, Peter gets away with it, John may have been disappointed with him and was probably shaking his head in the dark.

We leave Peter standing around a fire warming himself, I can’t help but picture a scene from Rocky with a bunch of guys standing warming themselves singing: take it back, doo doo doo doo, take it back. Take it back Peter, take back what you said. Anyone else know that scene.

We pick back up at vs. 25, and it restates that Peter was warming himself because we took a break to hear the trial of Jesus. You can read that on your own. Peter is now just trying to blend in, not attract any attention as he is watching the proceedings of Jesus being questioned. I hope no one notices me. Isn’t that the case with us sometimes? Sometimes it is easier to blend into a crowd of 8 thousand people and just blend in, no one requires anything of you, no one misses you if you don’t show up.

We think there doesn’t have to be a cost to discipleship. If I lay low no one will notice me. Sometimes as a disciple of Jesus Christ family dynamics change and husband and wife aren’t where they used to be so if we just look the other way, don’t rock the boat it will all go away and things will straighten out. I don’t want to be seen as a Jesus freak, after all. The same thought could be said about work, at school, in all of our interpersonal relationships. It is so much easier hiding out and trying to blend in. Fear seems to govern us in those times.

But Jesus tells us that we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. We hear from John that perfect love casts out fear. If we approach life from fear, we will harvest and live in fear. It is so much easier blending in. No decisions, no crisis of conscience, but also no real satisfaction that what we are doing is what God would want us to do which makes all the difference in the world.

Christ calls us to be his disciples. We need to be careful we are guided by his Holy Spirit in all that we do. Peter is asked in these later verses twice more if he was Jesus’ disciple and twice more he denies it. This time to people who were at the scene of the arrest and probably recognized him. And then the rooster crowed.

You know Jesus had warned him about this in that warm and comfortable upper room when no one could do any wrong. Back in 13:38 of John Peter has just declared his undying discipleship to Jesus as he declares that he would always follow Jesus, even, and I quote: “lay down my life for you”. Jesus says, truly before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times. He was even forewarned.

Let’s cut him some slack. Peter’s life is in danger in these verses. He was surrounded by police and armed men trying to get warm and curious as to the scene that is unfolding inside the high priest’s house. They were all probably recounting the evening’s events around the campfire when Peter joins them. These are the same men who came out to arrest Jesus. They had seen Peter cut off the ear of the servant’s high priest, and in fact one of them there was a relative of that man. If Peter had said yes, he could have been killed, oh the cost of discipleship is harsh when you come face to face with it.

It always saddens me that those who are critical of MLK seem to leave out the fact that he was a Christian martyr, that he died for the sake of Gospel, he died for justice, he died so that this nation could more closely reflect the kingdom of God. He was a true patriot because his American dream was as close to the kingdom of God as any other person’s dream that I have heard.

But not Peter, in the face of this danger, in the face of fear and probable death, in the face of realizing that he probably would have to give everything up, he was not able to make that commitment.

Where are we in our Christian walk as we drive down a sometimes dangerous and often treacherous road that is our faith. If we are too intense then we are out of our comfort zone. If we are faced with decisions that demand Christian responses, which all decisions do demand by the way, do we say as Christ did, I am he, or do we say as Peter did, What, me worry? Not me.

I pray that as we live out our lives here in this safe, bucolic environment that we will never forget to allow ourselves to be challenged in our faith, to step out of what is comfortable, to see the edginess of our God who doesn’t want us to embrace culture, but rather fight it, even at times, at a cost. Amen.