

There is No Denying It
Palm Sunday
This very night...you will deny me. Matthew 26:34
April 5, 2020
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

I can deny a lot of things, my age, my hair color, or how fast I was driving, but when I show you this picture, there is no denying this is my sister. (picture of my sister and me) I can deny a lot of things, but there is no denying, these two belong to me. (picture of Isaac, Brayden and me) I can deny a lot of things, but there is no denying, this is the best visitation / therapy dog a church could have. (picture of Titus)

We can deny a lot of things but there is definitely no denying the past month has been like a never ending scene from the Twilight Zone tv series or some alternate reality! I would have been the first to say (deny) that people are capable of hoarding toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and now tylenol, but there is no denying it. The shelves are empty and the ones that aren't can hardly keep up with the demand.

If you think what is happening in our community, cities around the world, is simply an over-rated, media-hyped flu season, you are in denial.

If you think the virus that is wreaking havoc can't be as bad as science and medical experts are saying it is, you are in denial.

If you think this will all be over in a few weeks, you are in denial.

There is no denying we are navigating strange and mostly uncharted territory. We are living in what will one day be the history our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will read about in school and ask questions about when they visit.

There is no denying this is a time of emotional, mental, and spiritual ups and downs, ins and outs, and everything in between. We all feel it - in one way or another; that sense of uncertainty and angst; perhaps frustration or dread in the pit of our stomach. It may manifest itself differently but it is there.

Yet in the midst of it all, there is also no denying, Grace Church, we know who we are. It's all over social media. There is no denying we are finding our voice, presence, and place in new ways that express who we are as individuals, families, church and community. We are all of it - all together.

The past 40 days we have walked the path of Lent together. We explored the theme of identity and how Jesus' time in the wilderness, which the season of Lent is based on, was his time to claim and solidify who he was and is as the son of God. It is for us then, also a time to solidify who we are as people of God and followers of Jesus.

There is no denying from the responses many of you shared when we were able to meet together here at church, and the responses you have posted online, on facebook, and our webpage. Here are some of those responses:

We are resilient.

We are family.

We are community.

We are giving.

We are forgiven.

We are God's people.

We are love in action.

We are welcoming.

We are broken, hurting, and have struggles.

We are mission minded.

We are connected.

We are on a journey individually and as a church.

We are loved.

There is no denying who we are Grace Church and in times like these, it makes all the difference.

Someone who knew all about denial was the apostle, Peter. One of Jesus' early followers and disciple. Peter was all heart- passionate about his faith and his devotion to Jesus. He wore his faith and excitement on his sleeve and had great energy around who Jesus was and what he was about in changing lives and turning expectations upside down.

He is described as one of the most courageous disciples; leaping off the boat to walk on water with Jesus, only to panic and need rescuing. There was a time he jumped off his own boat and swam to shore ahead of the other disciples when he saw Jesus. He was the one who was adamant that Jesus would never have to suffer and be killed, it wasn't possible, only to be rebuked by Jesus himself. He tried to do his best in the garden before Jesus was arrested, yet failed. And then failed again when he tried to protect Jesus when he was arrested.

That brings us to today's text, where we find Peter, moving through the last week of Jesus' life on earth. He is tired, frightened, short on sleep and bombarded with

emotional, mental, and spiritual upheaval. It had been a huge, full of people, chaotic few days since they arrived in town. One that started with a parade and celebration and ended with the unthinkable - Jesus' arrest and pending trial at this point.

Like the other disciples, Peter was at a loss. He didn't know what to do, where the safest place to go was, or who he could trust. Reeling in the struggle of it all, he is then confronted with an identity question.

Read text: Matt. 26:69-75 MSG

No one can read or hear this passage without being struck with the staggering honesty of the New Testament. If ever there was an incident which one might have expected to be swept under the rug, this was it. Yet here it is.

The amazing thing is, we have this story of Peter's denial, because Peter himself told it to others. Peter made it an essential part of his witness to Jesus' gospel message; and did so for the best of reasons. Every time he told the story, he could say, "that is the way that this Jesus we are talking about can forgive." He could say, "Jesus forgave me when I failed him in his most bitter time of need. That is what Jesus can do." That is who Jesus is.

There is no denying the depth of love, the complete sacrifice, and the unending compassion of Jesus. There is no denying who Jesus is, and Peter uses his own denial experience to tell us this truth. He uses his most vulnerable moment to reveal Jesus' strength.

This telling of Peter's denial has been called, "the failure of courage." I don't believe Peter's courage failed, I believe his human-ness did. It is recorded that the other disciples ran away: Peter did not. The text says Peter entered the courtyard of the High Priest's house. The house of the one interrogating Jesus. That took courage.

Even after his first denial in the courtyard, he didn't slip out the back. He moved to the porch. That took courage. A courage that was being torn between two feelings; love and fear. The love for his teacher / rabbi / friend and Lord, and the fear of losing his own life. The love for all that Jesus stood for, taught him and showed him, and the fear of none of it making a difference.

He denied knowing Jesus a second time and then a third.

Notice however, Peter did not deny who Jesus was, or what he came to do, or his power and authority. He did not deny that Jesus was the son of God; the Messiah and Lord. He denied his relationship with him and that is what made him weep.

I think Peter may have been just as stunned at his denial as we are reading it. There were no words to explain it, only tears and the final acceptance and realization that even then, when we flat out forget who we are and fail and deny our relationship with Jesus, we are loved and forgiven.

None of us know for sure how we are going to respond in times of crisis, disaster, or great uncertainty until it happens. None of us know for sure what we will do, how we will act, or what we will say until it happens.

Our identity in Christ is revealed in times of conflict, panic, and separation. Our identity in Christ is revealed in times like now, living in the midst of a pandemic. Our identity in Christ is revealed in how we treat others in times like these and how we respond to the needs around us.

There is no denying the presence of Jesus is with us. There is no denying that because we know who we are, Grace Church, we are together able to make a difference on so many levels. We are all a part of something much bigger than ourselves.

What started as a joke several years ago here at the church was the phrase, “the church has left the building.” That has now become even more of a reality. We have left the building. AND we are still the church. We are still doing and being church together. There’s no denying it: being church has never been about the building. We are living that reality now people of God.

You see evidence all around:

- Rainbows and teddy bears in windows and on front porches for children and families to see.
- People sewing face masks for emergency personnel and medical facilities.
- Individuals bannng together for a common cause and starting up local on-line communities, food and supply stations, and delivery services.
- Videos of individuals and families creating art and music together to encourage others.
- Teenagers reading stories on-line for others to listen too.

- High School seniors creating personal avatars and recording their favorite quotes for an online graduation video.
- Food and basic supplies being purchased and delivered to homebound individuals and families.
- Letter writing skills and snail mail making a comeback!

People of God, there is no denying these are challenging, nerve-racking, uncertain and unpredictable times. AND Jesus is with us moving, living, and revealing our identity in the midst. No matter what, we are who we are.

There is no denying it is hard on all of us.

There is no denying life will never be the same.

AND, there is no denying we will come through the other side.

There is no denying God is ultimately working for good in all things.

There is no denying that today, Palm Sunday, and the coming Holy Week, and Easter are going to be different this year.

And that's o.k. Because there is no denying who Jesus is and who we are in his love.