

John 18:4-11

⁴Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who are you looking for?”

⁵“Jesus the Nazarene,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus told them.

Judas, the betrayer, was standing with them. ⁶When Jesus told them, “I am he,” they backed away and fell to the ground.

⁷Then Jesus asked them again, “Who are you looking for?”

“Jesus the Nazarene,” they said.

⁸“I told you that I am he,” Jesus replied. “So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹This was to fulfill the statement he had spoken: “I did not lose any of those you have given me.”

¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant’s name was Malchus.

¹¹So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?”

Hands of Misguided Zeal

I.

Most of the gospel writers didn’t name the one with “Hands of Misguided Zeal,” as the theme for our sermon today talks about. Only John identified him. In the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday it was Peter who grabbed his sword and swung it near the head of the high priest’s servant, gashing his ear.

If John hadn’t mentioned Peter by name, the disciple responsible would have gone unnamed. You would have been left to guess the identity of the guilty party. But even if you had to guess, is it possible that your initial reaction would have been: “That sounds like something Peter might do!”?

Simon Peter was one of the Lord’s first and closest followers. He often took the lead. So often was this the case that he had been given the unofficial role of leader among the disciples. That is not necessarily a bad thing. When Jesus asked the Twelve who they thought he was, it was Peter who answered. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16, EHV). When Jesus came out to the disciples in the middle of the lake at night, Peter was the one who jumped out of the boat to meet him (Matthew 14:29). In the upper room, after Jesus predicted that all the disciples would abandon him, Peter was the first to pledge that he would rather die than disown his Savior (Matthew 26:35).

But there were other times; times when Peter’s react-before-you-think attitude didn’t serve him so well. Shortly after Peter made his beautiful confession of faith, he took Jesus aside and tried to convince him that going to Jerusalem and dying on a cross should not be a part of the Messiah’s mission. Jesus had to say to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23, EHV).

Peter certainly never forgot this stinging rebuke, but he didn’t really seem to fully understand it, either. What Peter does in today’s Lesson displays that. The big difference is that, instead of using words to impede God’s plan of salvation, this time Peter resorted to using brute force.

We know why Jesus’ enemies came to the garden. They hated him. They were armed with swords and clubs because they intended to kill him.

Peter had a sword, too, but he wielded it for a very different reason. He loved Jesus. He wanted Jesus to know that he was serious when he said that he would give up his life for him. Peter was full of what he *thought* was a righteous zeal, but that zeal turned out to be misguided.

II.

You and I love Jesus too. We become upset, even angry, when our Savior's name is dragged through the mud. When we see how his Word is ignored and ridiculed in our world, we want to do something about it. We want to protect Jesus. We want to defend Jesus. Those are good and godly impulses, but we need to be careful that we don't go too far, that we ourselves don't do something that goes against God's Word, that we don't become guilty of having "Hands of Misguided Zeal."

Besides identifying Peter as the disciple who assaulted Malchus, only John reports something else that happened that night, something that clears up any confusion about who was in control of the situation in the garden. Here's a hint: it wasn't the Jewish officials or the small army of soldiers who had come to arrest Jesus.

Instead of hiding in the shadows or heading for the hills, Jesus went out to meet his would-be captors. And the One who knew everything that was about to happen to him also knew the answer to the question he asked the soldiers: "Who are you looking for?" (John 18:4, EHV). They wanted Jesus. They had been wanting to get rid of him for a long time. After all their failed attempts of the past, *this* one would be successful; but only because Jesus' time had come.

"I am he," Jesus told them (John 18:5, EHV). What should have happened next is that the soldiers would rush him, bind him, and lead him back into the city. That's not exactly what happened. Something else happened. Something totally unexpected and unexplainable happened. When Jesus announced that he was the man they were looking for, they stepped back and fell down. Without raising his hand, without lifting a finger, Jesus demonstrated his divine power with only his powerful Word.

Jesus wasn't finished yet. Though he was vastly outnumbered, *he* was the one giving the orders. Though he would have had every right to defend himself, he was more concerned about the welfare of his followers. He told the crowd: "If you are looking for me, let these men go" (John 18:8, EHV), making good on his promise to protect his own.

III.

There was Peter; taking it all in; watching everything. He had seen how the mob had been forced to bow down before Jesus and how quickly they acquiesced to the Lord's terms of surrender. Instead of taking advantage of the peaceful release Jesus had negotiated, Peter decided to take matters into his own hands. Without any warning: "Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear" (John 18:10, EHV).

What was he thinking?

There are, perhaps, two ways we might ask that question. Perhaps we think: "I can't believe Peter would do something like that!" Perhaps we ask the question more literally: "When Peter raised his sword, what was he really thinking?" One possibility is that he *wasn't* thinking. He saw his friend surrounded by hostile men who wanted to harm him, and his instincts and emotions took over.

Another possibility is that Peter *did* think things through before he swung into action. He had replayed in his mind his pledge to defend Jesus to the death. He had convinced himself that this was going to be the night he would give up his life. He could see that his Savior needed help, and in spite of the odds, *he* was going to come to the rescue.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to help a friend in need, except for the fact that Jesus doesn't need any help. Jesus is true God. He is omniscient (he knows all). He is omnipotent (he controls all). Of all people, Peter should have known that. In the garden—and for three years before that—he had been given many convincing proofs of that.

Peter was guilty of assaulting another human being, but his decision to strike with his sword was only a symptom of a much more fundamental problem. By deciding that he needed to do something to help Jesus, Peter demonstrated a lack of understanding, or even worse, a lack of trust in God.

It could be a struggle for us to find parallels to what Peter did, to come up with examples of

Christians who used force to defend or advance the Christian cause. We might think of things like the Crusades or the Inquisition—some of the darkest days in the history of the church. More recently, perhaps a Christian extremist bombing an abortion clinic. But for the most part, modern Christianity is a peaceful religion. According to God’s Word, violence directed at another person—in the name of God or for any other reason—is a clear violation of the Fifth Commandment.

But doubting God’s power is something all of us might be able to relate to. Not trusting in God is a sin the sinful nature understands very well. Believing there is something *you* can do to help God, thinking *you* need to do something to help God, is a trap Christians fall into far too often. “If we would only elect the right political leaders or pass the right legislation, *then* we could get back to the good old days when our country was a Christian nation.” “If our church only initiated more programs for families or talked less about sin or was more like some of those other, more gentle churches, *then* our congregation would grow.” If *we* only did X,Y, or Z, then *we* could make things better.

If you want to identify the problem, look at the pronouns. Better yet, look in the mirror. You don’t have to hold a sword in your hands to be able to identify with Peter. You probably don’t have to try too hard to remember times in your life when your thinking was misguided. Yes, God wants God-fearing leaders. Yes, God wants healthy churches. Yes, God wants Christians to be filled with a godly zeal, but before we put our faith into practice, he wants us to put our trust in him. He wants us to make God’s Word and will our guide. And he wants us to understand how quickly things can go sideways when we don’t.

IV.

“So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?’” (John 18:11, EHV). Why was Jesus so upset? Why was Jesus so adamant? Because he knew what was at stake. He understood that there is only one way for sins to be forgiven, that there is only one path that leads to heaven. God the Father’s plan demanded that his Son be arrested that night and executed the next day.

That plan was carried out to perfection when our perfect substitute died in our place. Jesus willingly took that cup of suffering into his hands and drained it to the dregs to demonstrate how much he loved his misguided disciple—and how much he loves you and me.

John provides us with several unique details about what happened in the garden that night, but he doesn’t tell us what happened to Malchus, the man Peter struck with his sword. The gospel of Luke reports that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the servant’s ear and healed him (Luke 22:51).

It was Jesus’ final miracle before his crucifixion. Why did he do it? Why did he heal this man’s ear? Why was he so eager to help his enemy? That is who Jesus is. That is what Jesus does. Jesus came into this world to seek and to save. Jesus has a burning love for lost souls. Jesus is full of compassion and mercy, which explains why, a few hours after he healed Malchus, he reached out his hands one last time. He stretched out his hands on the cross to redeem us from our sins, to fulfill Isaiah’s prophetic words, so that by his wounds we might be healed (Isaiah 53:5). Amen.