

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland  
“Standing Up & Standing Back”  
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I’ve sometimes wondered: Am I as courageous as I think I am? And deeper than that: How far down do my convictions actually go? I’ll explain why I’m asking this.

When I look at the current state of geopolitics, I occasionally find myself wondering what I would do if a global conflict arose—something on the scale of the World Wars—where a draft or conscription was required. Would I have the courage to claim Conscientious Objector status?

On one hand, my head and heart both tell me: *Yes, there is no other option.* I cannot, in good conscience, imagine picking up a weapon with the intent to harm another human being. But on the other hand, I know the history. I know that COs were often met with ridicule—dismissed as cowards by a society that viewed “civic duty” as the ultimate defence of state values. Add on the extra layer, or guilt perhaps, of being a leader in the peace church tradition, I ask myself, am I as courageous as I think I am? In peacetime, it’s easy. In another time...I hope that it’s not another story.

This internal tug-of-war—the gap between the convictions we claim in the quiet and the choices we make under pressure—is exactly where we find ourselves today. We like to think our values are concrete, but we rarely know for sure until we’re forced to enact them. In the Upper Room, while their feet were being washed, the disciples had all the ‘head knowledge’ in the world. But now, in the courtyard, that knowledge has to travel the longest eighteen inches in the human body: from the head to the heart.

It feels like we’ve taken a massive narrative leap this week—moving from the intimacy and Jesus washing the disciples’ feet to the cold reality of a trial and Peter’s betrayal. To borrow a line from John Oliver: “A lot has happened” since our last reading. From this point on, things will happen quickly. We’re in the last few hours of Jesus’ life.

In the narrative arc of John’s Gospel, we have transitioned from the intimacy of the Last Supper (Chapters 13–17) to the starkness of the arrest in Chapter 18. Until this moment, Jesus story and his disciples’ story have been the same. The one relied on the other.

Our scripture today does something fascinating: as we move closer to the cross, the stories of Jesus and his disciples—once perfectly intertwined—begin to separate. They start to unravel. Starting earlier in this chapter, we see Jesus and his followers begin to walk two very different paths. While this isn’t exactly a “final exam,” it is certainly a test of how much they have integrated Jesus’ teachings—a test of how much they have moved from head knowledge to heart knowledge.

In our reading today, we encounter these two parallel stories unfolding at once. In my cinematic imagination, I can see “quick cuts” flashing between these two vastly different settings.

On one hand, we have the courtyard. We see Peter in a very public, exposed space, nervously approaching a charcoal fire.

On the other hand, we have the residence. We cut to Jesus being led deep into the High Priest's residence—what one commentator describes as a Jerusalem “blacksite.”<sup>1</sup>

While Peter is out in the open, Jesus is concealed and constrained. Both are vulnerable, but in entirely different ways. One faces the pressure of the crowd; the other faces the weight of the empire. The irony is sharp: Jesus is being interrogated by the powerful, while Peter is being interrogated by the powerless. And yet, it is the one by the fire who seems the most afraid.

In the flickering light of a burning fire, Peter is questioned about his allegiance to this Jesus. Three times he's asked, “*Do you know this man?*” Three times, he denies knowledge or association with Jesus. Three times he's invited to speak truth, and three times he chooses the safety of a lie.

In his head, Peter knows Jesus well. He's walked the dusty paths with him; he's seen the miracles, the hungry are fed, the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are healed and the dead rise. He was the first of the disciples to declare Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. In the gospel of Luke, he was the one brave enough — or maybe impulsive enough — to step out of the boat to walk on water. And just a few verses ago, he was willing to draw the sword and to fight and defend Jesus by the sword.

But was this all a show? It was easy to be brave when the Messiah was standing right next to him. Now that Jesus isn't there to back him up, Peter's bravado evaporates.

In his heart, the fear has taken the driver's seat. Whether it's the fear of ridicule, the fear of guilt through association, or the simple primal fear of the mob, fear has robbed him of his reason. Peter isn't just lying; he is unravelling. The head knowledge of who Jesus is cannot survive the heart's desperate need to belong to the crowd by the fire.

On the other hand, in the dim, dark, suffocating confines of an interrogation room, Jesus is questioned. He is asked about his identity and his followers. While Jesus' recorded interrogation is brief, the pattern remains. Jesus speaks truth to power.

Even when the backhand of a guard strikes his face, Jesus does not flinch from telling the truth of who he is. No physical coercion, no threat of violence, and no “blacksite” pressure can alter what is true.

For Jesus, unlike Peter, there is no head-heart dichotomy. He doesn't have to weigh the options. As Jesus has said before, it is the Truth that sets us free. And Jesus lives what he says; he speaks the truth. It may not free his wrists from the rope or his body from the prison, but it frees him from the much deeper prisons of deception and cowardice.

By simply standing in his truth, Jesus exposes the frailty of his captors. He reveals that their only tools are coercion and fear, while his tool is a witness that cannot be silenced. His vulnerability is not a sign of weakness; it is a witness to the unstoppable power that truth carries.

Both Jesus and Peter were in vulnerable situations, exposed, isolated, and under pressure. But their responses were worlds apart. One chooses self-protection, the other chooses truth, witness, something that usually leads to solidarity with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Hearlson.

When we face our own "impossible" situations, how do we actually act, as opposed to how we might think we'll act. This is the perennial question of where the proverbial rubber hits the road. It is easy to talk a fine game within these walls, but where is the connection to reality? Where is the integrity? For too long, the church has been haunted by the ghost of hypocrisy—a gap between what we say in the light and what we do in the shadows.

I was speaking with a leader recently whose congregation was faced with a gut-wrenching choice. Their congregation had been approached with an incredible opportunity: the chance to host a prestigious educational program in their building. It was the kind of offer that brings stability, reputation, and life into a space.

But there was a catch.

They knew that by accepting this new school, a local harm-reduction and support center—which served some of the most vulnerable, marginalized members of their neighbourhood and their community—would be forced to close its doors due to zoning laws.

It was a choice between a 'shining opportunity' and a 'sacrificial service.' One path offered prestige; the other offered the continued protection of people society often prefers to ignore. What were they to do?

In the end, they chose to reject the offer. They chose to align themselves with the broken rather than the 'successful,' because their conviction told them that their community's survival was more important than their own institutional growth."

This is the question for us today. How does the church not only speak about its values, but also embody them? Jesus stood in that interrogation room and refused to let fear dictate his identity. He lived his convictions even when it cost him everything. Peter sat by the fire and let fear dictate his. More often than we'd like to admit, we are more like Peter than Jesus—seeking the warmth of social acceptance while our courage grows cold. But the call of the Gospel is to step away from the fire of self-protection and join Jesus in the vulnerability of radical solidarity."

When the rooster crowed that morning, I imagine a cut away to both Peter and Jesus.

We see Peter, shattered. In the very moment he was called to demonstrate who he was and who he followed, he chose to turn his back. The realization hits him like a physical blow: his "head knowledge" couldn't save him from his heart's fear.

And then we cut to Jesus. I see him bowing his head in a heavy, quiet resignation. Not just in resignation, but in a profound, lonely faithfulness. He remains constant even when those he washed the feet of have scattered."

But this isn't just a story about two men in Jerusalem; it's a story about our own lives. We see it in the choice to claim Christ's message of Peace in a world at war. We see it in the congregation that turned down a prestigious school to protect a harm-reduction center for the marginalized. These aren't just "good deeds"—they are moments of embodied witness. They are the moments where we decide if our faith is a cozy "Upper Room" conversation or a "Courtyard" reality.

The church is often criticized for hypocrisy, and perhaps that's because we spend too much time trying to stay warm by the world's fires. We want the comfort of belonging, the safety of the crowd, and the prestige of the "shining opportunity." But the path of Jesus leads away from the fire and into solidarity with the broken.

The rooster crows for all of us eventually. It crows in the moments we are asked to choose between our reputation and our convictions. And so, when that sound echoes in your life this week, how might you react?

May we find the grace to step away from the fire, and the courage to stand in the light of the things we say we believe.

Amen