

INTRODUCTION FOR LIVE STREAMING, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

11:20 Sunday Morning, @ www.facebook.com/austinvillevcovertchurches

GOOD MORNING! WELCOME TO OUR AUSTINVILLE / COVERT SUNDAY SERVICE.

MAY WE PRAY:

Heavenly Father,

Jesus, keep me near the cross, There a precious fountain, Free to all—a healing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain. Near the cross! O Lamb of God, Bring its scenes before me; Help
me walk from day to day, With its shadow o'er me. Near the cross I'll watch and wait, Hoping, trusting
ever, Till I see my Savior's face, Leave Your presence never.

~ In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, AMEN

Doxology

Guire Webb & Kim Chaapel

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

Congratulations to Dan and Hillary Saxton on the birth of Eli Daniel Saxton, 6 pounds 11 ½ Ounces.
—And to Grandparents Susan and Steve Saxton!

Susan Saxton had carpal tunnel surgery —Her stitches are out. .
Connie & Greg and Kayle & Delanie are in Georgia putting up a post & beam house.

Annual Business Meeting/ Board Meeting today, February 21, 2021 following our live stream service.
It will be a short meeting due to COVID conditions; pastor Ken has all reports published and bound.

Guthrie Clinic has set up a “vaccination-factory” assembly-line in the old Athens/Sayre K-Mart;
they are administering entire shipments of vaccines until they are gone. Keep checking
<https://www.guthrie.org> then click on COVID-19 vaccine information for a chance at setting up a
vaccination appointment if you're 65 or older! Or call 866-488-4743. You can find this information on
your Live-stream service schedule posted on our facebook today. If you get an appointment & can't
get there, let us know. We'll take you.

Wear your mask, keep the physical distance, wash your hands. Get your vaccine as soon as
you can. Stay “heart connected!” If you're high tech, flip open your lap-top, I-phone, or I-pad. If
you're low tech write a note. If you're no tech, pick up the phone —don't be alone. Or, you can do all
three! We can do this! Don't give up —we're way too close to winning. Don't give COVID a chance
to “sneak-in” through a different door.

So glad you are here, Glorianne Dziuba at the piano, Gloria at the organ, Gabrielle Fish at the camera,
Kim Chaapel and Guire Webb (leading our singing), some choir members to give us words for our
hymns, all of you who have gathered around your devices. We're trying hard to keep you safe. We are
a “rule keeping people” following the PA mandates and CDC guidelines. Thank you so much for
coming to church today.

Growing Apart

Luke 22:54-62

It is possible for individuals to "grow apart" from life, for farmers to "grow apart" from the land, for spouses to "grow apart" from one another, for children and parents to "grow apart" from each other. It is possible for Christians to "grow apart" from God.



Growing apart is an insidious saboteur of all that is good in life. To enjoy anything, we must be close to it. The farmer who, when he plows, smells the fresh turned soil, sees the country-side where his field is set, hears the whip of the wind, and feels the sunshine, or the chilly snow-squall on his face, is a farmer who gets the most out of farming. He is close to his farm. We must smell the new-mown hay and burning leaves if we are to live fully. Our spirits must brush the woods at the edge of the field.

The experiences of life are best when we enter into them --when we *feel* them --when we are close to them. We cannot live with diss-attachment and enjoy anything. So it is with our relationships with people and with God. What is true in nature is true with our friends. The closer we are, the truer we are, the more open we are, the more appreciative we are, the more we will enjoy them and the more they will enjoy us.

In the world of people, we have come to call this closeness love. What is true in nature, and what is true in our friendships with people, is also true of our friendship with God. The closer we are to God the more we enjoy him and the happier and safer we are. It is when we are close that we "taste and see that the Lord is good." If people are to experience *well-being* they must have more than things; they must have God and others. Only then can life be what it must be; only then can we belong. To grow apart is to be alone.

I want to talk about one of the most miserable times in the life of the Apostle Peter. "But Peter followed Him *afar off* unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end" (Matthew 26:58). "Peter followed him," and that speaks well of Peter. It puts him in a class almost entirely by himself. There were those present who were bitter enemies of Jesus. They hated him; but, Peter was not of that hostile, hating crowd.

Then, there were those present who had little or no interest in Jesus. They were neither his friends nor his enemies; they were not there either to fight him or to protect him. They were merely sightseers. They thought there was going to be an interesting show and they wanted to see it. However, they had no personal interest, whatever, in Jesus himself.

Peter was not part of the indifferent crowd. "Peter followed him" as a friend. Peter loved Jesus with a

great devotion. Had this not been the case, he would not have dared to follow him at all at this risky moment. Every other disciple had forsaken him and had fled, with the exception of John. It was to Peter's credit that in this hour of trial and danger, in this hour when the support of others had evaporated, Peter yet followed him.

Still, the remainder of the text is disappointing; because it tells us *how* Peter followed Jesus. There are different ways to follow Christ. We may follow in close intimacy, so as to be continuously conscious of his inspiring presence. We may follow so as to bring gladness to His heart and strengthening courage to our own, or we may follow fearfully, distantly, and half-heartedly --so it was with Peter.

The story becomes increasingly interesting when we remember how many disciples there are who are just like Peter. There must be multitudes who follow Christ after a fashion --but, follow him afar off. They have not renounced their allegiance; they would not think of turning from their faith altogether; but, they have no wholehearted devotion. There is no passionate pressing to the side of Christ to get the most from the friendship. They are followers, but there is a coolness in their following.

How did Peter come to be a distant disciple? I do not think for a moment that he made up his mind that he would be one. He never sat down and deliberately decided that he would become a half-hearted and useless disciple. Few of us do that. Almost everyone, before coming to Christ, expects to count for something once he or she comes. Few decide in advance on a life of uselessness. Few determine ahead of time to be halfway surrendered. However, many drift into such a conundrum little by little. Oftentimes, we become distant before we are aware of it. We drift into it unconsciously. At the next moment, we look up from what we were doing to discover we are miles from shore.

The first factor that brought about Peter's separation from Christ was his own self-sufficiency. Christ knew about his weakness and tried to warn him. Jesus said, "All of you shall be offended because of me this night, for it is written I will smite the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." This statement did not startle Peter in the least. With some indignation, he replied, "Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended." Peter was too sure of himself. He was sure that he was better than other Christians. He was sure that others were weak, while he was strong. He might as well have said, "Lord, you are entirely mistaken about me. You have no proper estimate of my strength or my loyalty. My brother Andrew may go back on you. Moody and pessimistic Thomas may doubt you. James and John, even though they are the *Sons of thunder*, may lose their flash --but not me! "I am ready to go to prison and death with you."

Self-sufficiency is never a means of bringing us closer to Christ, or anyone else for that matter. Those who approach him must always come by the path of humility. We will not come to a Christ we do not need, It is so with all of our relationships. Anne Murray's song, *You Needed Me* was not only a best seller, it was also a good piece of thinking. We do need God, and we do need our friends. When the Pharisee went to the temple to pray, what kept him far from God was not his lack of decency, it was his self-sufficiency. It is hard to connect with a God you do not need. So, you see, self-sufficiency is a barrier that keeps many from becoming Christians, and it keeps many Christians (like Peter) spiritually weak. For the simple reason that God cannot help a person who doesn't need his help. If you feel able in your own strength, then that is all the strength you will have.

The second step in Peter's separation from Christ was his failure to listen to Christ or talk with Christ.

Sometimes children hear, but they don't listen. Peter failed to pray. People who are close know how to talk together in such a way that they connect with, and understand each other. You remember how Jesus had led Peter, and James, and John into the inner parts of the garden and said to them, "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation?" Jesus knew the ordeal that was ahead of them; he knew the testing that was soon to come to them. He knew that if they approached that testing prayerless, they would approach it powerless. Yet, when they should have prayed, they slept. It is not always easy to talk with God. When the ordeal of the arrest came, they were not ready for it.

Prayer is our means of keeping in touch with Christ. The prayerless disciple will always be a distant disciple. You cannot neglect the place of prayer and stay in intimate touch with Christ, anymore than people can remain good friends without talking honestly and openly --sharing concerns and fears that may be carried better together than alone.

Finally, Peter was separated because of fear. Had Peter prayed, he would doubtless have stood firm in this hour of testing. Failing to pray, he lacked courage. He was not so panic-stricken that he utterly deserted, but he dared not follow the Lord Jesus too closely. He was afraid that he might be identified with him. He was afraid he might have to share his cross. He was too devoted to Christ to utterly forsake him and too fearful to follow closely enough to receive any help.

What was the outcome of following at a distance? It ended in failure for three reasons:

First, it put Peter in a hostile crowd. He no longer walked in the fellowship of Christ. He was no longer finding his companions among the followers of Christ. Those among whom he walked were the servants of the high priest. They did not believe in Christ; they thought he was an imposter. They did not love him; they hated him. Therefore, Peter found himself in a difficult situation. The atmosphere about him was tense with hate and chilly with scorn, contempt and ridicule. It was no spring day for Peter, and it dampened his loyalty and made it easy for him to become a coward. There is a lot of power in atmosphere; I don't think we ever appreciate its real might. We do become like our friends.

Peers have power. Samson could not laugh and carouse with the people of Gaza without losing his power. Herod did not want to murder John the Baptist; he did not want to keep his foolish oath. He would have never killed John, had he not put in with a bad crowd. He did the deed for the sake of those who sat with him. He and Peter, and some of us, illustrate the truth spoken by a wise man, "The companion of fools shall be destroyed." Peers have power --pick them well.

Secondly, following from a distance, Peter lost faith. It was impossible for him to live in a hostile crowd, separated from Christ, and at the same time keep his faith unshaken. So we read this pathetic word; "Peter went into the high priest's palace and sat with the servants." For what? To give the Lord Jesus the encouragement of his personal presence? No. To make good his promise that he would go with him both to prison and to death? No. He went in and sat with the servants "to see the end" --that was it. Peter had lost his faith. He was there "to see the end."

One day prior, Peter said, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." Now, Peter has decided that

he was mistaken. Jesus told Peter that he was going to build his church and that "the gates of hell would not prevail against it." Peter decided that they had already prevailed. His hope was gone; there was nothing more for him to do now, but sit among the enemies of Christ "to see the end."

Thirdly, with faith gone, so was Peter's courage gone. He had already been afraid at the arrest of Jesus. Now panic overwhelms him as a servant girl asks if he were not a disciple of Jesus. He is evasive and declares that he doesn't understand her. The question is asked a second time; this time he denies that he knows Jesus at all. When asked the third time, he begins to curse and swear. Why? Because Christians are not strong when they have lost their faith. The difference between Caleb and Joshua and the ten other spies was faith. Caleb and Joshua saw the giants in the land, but Caleb and Joshua also saw God.

When we drift away from Christ we are seldom an asset, but a liability. We do not see victory, but disaster. We are no longer positive, but negative. We no longer honor the Lord, but deny him.

We may not declare with our lips what Peter declared, but we have, no doubt, declared it with our lives. I don't know this man Jesus. When opportunity comes to live as he lived, we often refuse. Yet, in spite of his failure, Peter has a message for us that is rich in hope. He tells us that the one who followed afar off yesterday may be close to the Lord today. He gives new insight into the infinite approachableness of the Lord Jesus. He tells us that there is a place at his side even for those of us who have denied him.

Jesus passed by, looked at Peter, and Peter's heart was broken. Peter started to cry and something within Peter died --his self-importance and self-sufficiency. Peter knew for the first time that he was really a weak person. You could say he realized what a person really is --and that he was one. Jesus could hardly wait to get to the door of his tomb to send Peter a special message. "Go tell my disciples *and Peter.*" Not only so, but he gave Peter a special interview. "The Lord is risen indeed and hath appeared unto Peter."

Peter was finally clothed with humility, as every one of us ought to be. So, he wrote in his letter, "Be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble." Now, with humility and prayer he regained faith. With faith regained, Peter was able to carry out his original promise; however, it was no longer a boast. "I am ready and willing to follow you to prison and to death." You see, the strong Peter was really the weak Peter, while the weak Peter was really the strong Peter.

Paul wrote, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

When I am weak, I pray. When I am weak, I need Christ. When I am weak, I stay near Christ. When I realize my own weakness, I have a higher regard for the other weak disciples. You cannot follow from a distance and really follow. When we stop praying, when we become self-sufficient, when we allow our approach to ministry to be driven by fear, then we too can expect to drift away from Christ.

"Jesus, keep me near the cross --there a precious fountain; free to all a healing stream, flows from calvary's mountain."