



Pastor Ted Van Raalte is minister of the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church at Surrey, British Columbia tvnraalte@gmail.com



MATTHEW 13:52

"But he denied it, 'Woman, I don't know him,' he said."

Luke 22:57

Jesus Excommunicated

Each of Peter's three denials warrants careful study. Altogether the three are designed to isolate our Lord more and more in his suffering, but this first one was particularly painful. Understanding it overwhelms us, but may Jesus' love in the face of it overwhelm us even more!

After his capture, Jesus had been taken to the high priest's house for a speedy night-time trial. This rather palatial home was built in a square with an open courtyard in the centre. Jesus was being tried in one of the rooms that was open to the courtyard, so that those around the fire could more or less witness the trial. Peter had been let in by another disciple (likely John) who knew the servant girl at the door. Squatting around the fire with the others to stay warm, Peter was trying to look like he fitted in. But the servant girl who singled him out emphasized his connection to Jesus, "This man was with [Jesus]." Peter's response was, "Woman, I don't know him."

Was Peter fearing for his life? Not likely. Another disciple was there unharmed and had even helped him get in. Think back: an hour before, Peter had tried to defend Jesus with his sword. Peter had swung for the head, cutting off a man's ear. He meant business. But then Jesus had rebuked him and healed their enemy's ear. Of all things! Peter was stung. Being an emotional and impetuous man, it's not hard to imagine that he became angry. He felt rejected by Jesus and now he rejected Jesus in return. He vehemently denied his

association with Jesus, "Woman, I don't know him."

Did Peter not know who Jesus was? All Jerusalem knew Jesus! In fact, Peter's words were much stronger than a claim of ignorance. He actually echoed the Jewish excommunication formula. Its words were, "I (we) have never known you." These words of shunning amounted to saying, "You have no more place with us. We don't know you. For us, you don't exist." Peter says, "Woman, I don't know him." By saying this, Peter denies that he has any present love for Jesus. He won't acknowledge his Lord. He rejects him. He excommunicates Jesus from his life.

The Father in heaven thereby caused his precious Son to be more and more isolated in his sufferings. "He was despised and rejected by men" (Isa 53:3). It wasn't just the "friend" Judas who "lifted his heel against" Jesus (Ps 41:9), but Peter joined in. He joined the Sanhedrin in excommunicating and falsely condemning Jesus. Christ alone must save, without any help, while rejected.

But there is even more going on. We are being saved. For through Peter, even God joins in. Peter's words foreshadow what is about to happen as God the Father drives his Son out of the city gates and into the land of forsakenness. The Father in his justice is going to say, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoer!" Jesus will be excommunicated. He must be judged not only as a sinner but also an apostate, to bear the sins of Peter the apostate. Jesus is coming under the

very wrath that will forever keep lit the fires of hell – that divine justice which must remain perfect and exert itself against all evil. This is what Jesus underwent for our sakes.

How did Jesus respond? Just as Jesus reached out to Peter through the sound of the rooster, the look of his eyes, and the memory of his powerful words (Luke 22:61), so Jesus also reached out to the Father even in the midst of his God-forsaken suffering: "My God, my God." He thirsted after God's kingdom and his righteousness (John 19:28), and finally committed his spirit into the Father's hands (Luke 23:46). By his faith and obedience to the plan for our salvation he took away our sentence of excommunication and re-opened the way to God so that we who believe might nevermore be forsaken by God.

The suffering and death of Christ should overwhelm us not just because they were so horrible, but because this is what he had to endure to remove our guilt. We too spoke with Peter. We too deserted Christ. But "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Indeed, "Christ died for the ungodly" – that's us. We were "God's enemies" when he reconciled us to himself (Rom 5:6-10). Since this is so, we have nothing to fear when we are found to be in Christ by faith. He knows his own, intimately, from before the foundation of the world. He is reaching out to us even in our times of rejection, leaving the ninety-nine to find us and rescue us from excommunicating ourselves. His love overwhelms us and gathers us in. 