

**Nailed**  
**Matthew 26: 69-75**

You have just heard the whole story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ from the Gospel according to Matthew. From the preparations for the Passover meal in the upper room through the dinner itself and the announcement that one of the disciples would betray him, on through Jesus' time of prayer in Gethsemane, his arrest and trial before the high priest and then Pilate, to finally the crucifixion itself, Jesus' death and burial – you now have heard the Christian story, at least an important part of the story. Maybe it was review for you or maybe it was not very familiar at all. But now you know. You could say you have these facts nailed down.

**But to have facts nailed down and to have faith nailed down are two very different ideas.** To simply call oneself a Christian is one thing; to live the faith is another. When pressed to declare what you believe, to stand up on the strength of your convictions, a few facts that you might remember will not be enough. A few handy Bible verses will not suffice. If your living is not infused with the Holy Spirit, you will fail to give good witness to the Christian faith, and that is what really matters.

Like Peter. Peter, that outspoken disciple who once blurted out that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the bold one Jesus said would be the rock upon which he would build the church. Peter got nailed by servant girls and some bystanders. *He was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean."* Then another girl said the same thing: *"This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

Then the bystanders: *“Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”*

But Peter failed to stand up to his faith in Jesus, the faith that had become part of his very being. *“I do not know what you are talking about...I do not know the man...I do not know the man!”*

We are in shock. Peter! How could you?! Peter must have wondered the same thing about himself because *he went out and wept bitterly.*

**The dialogue between Peter and the ones who confronted him suggests what a living faith would look like.**

*This man was with Jesus...he is one of them.* Yes, I am one of Jesus’ people. I belong to the group of his followers. I am a disciple. Here is what he teaches us: to love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves; to care for the poor and hungry and helpless among us. He taught us to pray. He teaches us to repent of our sins, to forgive as God has forgiven us. He told us to love one another. Yes, I am one of them. I am not ashamed to say it and I’m not wishy-washy about it either.

*“I do not know the man!”* Oh, yes I do! Being a Christian means that Jesus is personal to me. I feel his guiding and comforting presence. I see his hand at work through the people of the church, in its missions and in its teaching. I hear his voice in the music, in the words of solace at a memorial service and of promise at a baptism. He is here at the communion table; he moves the praying; he enlivens the fellowship. Jesus is personal to me – as a Christian.

**I don't think it's actually possible to nail down the faith, but living the faith can certainly be obvious – or not.** Maybe that's as close as we can get. Will Willimon tells a good story to illustrate the point.

He has a friend, an international economist, who grew up in the church but moved away from it. But then he came back to the church and became active. Willimon asked him what propelled him to become part of the church again. He said that on an academic visit to the former Soviet Union, he had a conversation with a colleague who was a Communist. In the course of the conversation, she asked whether he believed in God. He said that he did. And then she asked, “What difference does it make in your life that you believe in God? I don't believe, but if I did, it would probably complicate my life. What difference does God make in your life?” And Willimon's friend said that he could not come up with a single thing in his life that was different because of his faith.

He was embarrassed by having no ready answers. Isn't it odd, Willimon comments, how sometimes people who say they don't know Jesus have an uncanny way of knowing more about Jesus than we who do? Sometimes ... these people expose the limits of our fidelity and we are forced to say what we believe, or else appear embarrassingly out of step with our own professions of faith. (Willimon 47)

I wonder whether any of you have ever found yourselves in a situation like Willimon's friend and how it went for you. Were you reluctant or bold? Were you hesitant or sure? Might you have said, There are gaps in my understanding, but I am in pursuit of Jesus Christ? Living faith is very hard to nail down. I think we are always in pursuit of it, searching for ways to know Jesus more intimately and to be clearly recognized as “one of them”, one of those who follow the Christ.

Sometimes we need someone outside the faith, though, - an agnostic roommate, a Communist colleague, a Muslim co-worker, a simple servant girl – to question us, to challenge us, and to make us say what we believe.

And even if our facts are shaky and our experience narrow, the pursuit of faith in Christ, in itself, speaks out strongly.

Shortly we will recite the words of the Apostles' Creed. The Creed was composed centuries ago in response to questions and challenges to the early church and to counter wrong statements about the faith. Just what is it we Christians believe? Let's get this nailed down.

And so, we will return to the facts. But understand, my friends, that these facts of the faith come alive only in your attention to them and in your intentional living as a follower of Jesus Christ.

And now to the One who is able to do far more with us than we could ever imagine – to God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Willimon, William H. "The Examination." *Pulpit Resource* 36.1 March 2008: 45-48.

Rev. Kathryn Henry  
Peapack Reformed Church  
Gladstone, NJ  
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