

The scene of Jesus' arrest and questioning by the high priest is paralleled by Peter's questioning in the courtyard of the high priest. Jesus and Peter are operating with two different visions of what's going on, and therefore their answers contrast with each other. Jesus, as always in John, is fully in control. He knows that a grain of wheat that dies will bear much fruit, so he is very willing to die. In fact, this ironic perspective is part of the principle that Jesus has constantly narrated: that last is first, least is greatest, dead is alive, shame is honor. His so-called humiliation is actually his glorification.

Peter is entirely without ironic consciousness in this scene. He is frankly intimidated by the sheer power of the forces arrayed against Jesus. He had done his one valiant bit of resistance in the garden when he cut off a slave's ear, and not only had it not slowed down the soldiers, it had earned him a reproof from Jesus. Now Peter is just frightened.

The high priest questions Jesus about his teaching, and Jesus answers, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues . . . I have said nothing in secret." The questioning, which is meant to make him feel that he's done something wrong, instead shows him to be undefensive, pointing out that he has nothing to hide. A policeman slaps his face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" and Jesus again answers without equivocation: "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" His answer puts the aggressor on the defensive. Jesus is not shamed.

Meanwhile out in the courtyard Peter is questioned by slaves, one of whom is a woman, and each time, intimidated and defensive, he denies that he is a disciple of

Jesus. Peter's understanding of what is happening is that Rome and the temple authorities are in control; they will kill Jesus horribly and mow down any disciple foolish enough to identify himself, and the Jesus movement will be effectively over. Whatever of Jesus' ironic perspective Peter had ever understood, he has forgotten it now. As Peter sees it, he is last and the authorities are first; death trumps life, and all he can hope for is to escape identification.

I began to wonder, what would it have looked like if Peter's resistance in the garden had succeeded? In the grammar of honor and shame in this society, Jesus' arrest is shameful. It is shameful to have hands laid upon one, as the soldiers did, and to be forced into captivity. When Peter drew his sword and struck at one in the arresting crowd, he was upholding the honor of his teacher. Indeed, failure to respond to a challenge is shameful, and Peter would not allow Jesus to be shamed. So what if things had played out the way Peter wanted them to? Suppose by some miracle the soldiers had been intimidated and left, or others of Jesus' supporters had whipped out swords and they'd had a battle right there, and Jesus had slipped away or maybe drawn a sword himself like the Black Panther and cut down his persecutors. I suppose they would have averted his crucifixion, but at what cost? In resorting to violence, they would have accepted the terms of shame and honor, weakness and power, by which their opponents were operating. Resistance would have been tacit admission that the best way to make peace is by killing your opponents. If Peter's resistance had succeeded, it would have been a Pyrrhic victory—as King Pyrrhus of Epirus ruefully remarked in 279 BCE after winning a costly battle, “If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be

utterly ruined.” Peter would have saved Jesus’ life at the cost of the whole point of Jesus’ life: that love is stronger than death.

O. Henry’s short story, “The Gift of the Magi,” is about a couple of sort of Pyrrhic victories. The young couple, madly in love and desperately broke, want to give each other Christmas gifts. The wife cuts off and sells her beautiful hair to buy her husband a watch chain, while the husband sells his watch in order to buy his wife an ornamental comb for her hair. In one sense they have won, because they have each figured out how to afford a gift for the other. In another sense they have lost, because their sacrifices have lost them the ability to make use of the other’s gift. But ultimately I think they really have won, because the point of giving Christmas gifts is to express love and affirm a relationship, and they have done that.

Peter denies any relationship with Jesus after the altercation in the garden. He has tacitly admitted defeat; Rome and the temple hold all the power, and to avoid death, he must not be associated with Jesus. But in the act of saving his own life, I think Peter realizes that he has lost something far more precious: his connection with Jesus. The cock crows for the third time, as Jesus had said it would, and he realizes that he has become what he always said he was not, a traitor. He has won a Pyrrhic victory by denying his identity as a member of the most hopeful and life-filled movement anyone had ever seen. Better a live dog than a dead lion . . . or maybe not.

We know how the story ends, and we know that, as in O. Henry’s story, the relationship outlasts the Pyrrhic victory. In fact, re-recruited by the risen Christ, Peter becomes the boldest of early church leaders, fearlessly confronting

government and Temple authorities repeatedly. But today's reading stops well short of that plot twist, so we should stop with it and let Peter's loss sink in. When push comes to shove, he just can't believe that foolishness, weakness, and shame in /human eyes/ are wisdom, strength, and honor in reality. He reverts to reliance on brute force, and is ashamed and bereft by the time the cock crows.

The temptation that violence holds out is that victory, or peace, can be achieved by crushing one's enemies. That's what Peter's acting on when he lashes out with his sword in the garden, and in today's passage in the courtyard, he's assuming that he's lost because Caiaphas will crush Jesus and anyone identified with him. I suspect this is at play when people commit mayhem with guns—some sense that a supremely violent act will resolve an unresolved tension. But in fact violence simply generates more violence; it doesn't resolve anything.

John's gospel does not portray the suffering human Jesus of Luke or Mark. But in showing us a serene, all-knowing Jesus who is above the machinations of cynical politicians, John's gospel underlines the subversive truth of Jesus' teaching: in a culture obsessed with honor, the one who accepts humiliation without being ashamed is the one who wins. The one who absorbs the violence inflicted on him and does not pass it on to others is the one whose victory lasts. The one who is not afraid of dying, to paraphrase Bette Midler, is the one who's learned to live.

Whatever struggles we are engaged in, it may be heartening to remember that defeat is not necessarily defeat. If we are engaged in a way that recognizes the dignity of the opponent *and* our own dignity, if we are trying to find a resolution that does not annihilate the other, even if we lose, we are winning. God plays the long

game. Better a dead lion than a live dog.

Let us pray: Holy God,

We, like Peter, often turn our backs on you. Forgive us and show us a new way to live, walking boldly and passionately toward you. Amen.