

Peter's denial and our judgment (John 18:1-19:42)

Peter doesn't want to suffer. Who does?

by [Debra J. Mumford](#)

March 28, 2018

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Sometimes being a disciple of Jesus Christ means being persecuted. Ida B. Wells-Barnett believed that she was called by God to be an anti-lynching activist. During her lifetime (1862-1931), African Americans were being lynched publicly by white people, to terrorize them into abdicating their civil liberties and living as second-class citizens. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, between 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) and 1950, more than 4,000 African Americans were lynched in southern states.

Wells-Barnett began writing about lynching in 1892 after three African American men, who were friends of her family, were lynched because their grocery store was competing with a white-owned grocery store in Memphis, Tennessee. She wrote about lynching and other forms of racial discrimination as a reporter and newspaper owner. She traveled throughout the United States and Great Britain to bring attention to her cause. She received death threats regularly. Her newspaper office was destroyed by a mob one evening while she was out of town. Wells-Barnett relied on her faith to endure her persecution. Despite the many obstacles that were put in her way, she fought against injustice until she died in 1931 of kidney failure. (Emilie Townes writes about Wells-Barnett in *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*.)

Some may criticize Peter because, unlike Wells-Barnett, he runs away from persecution. When Peter sees that Jesus is facing a certain death, he denies even being associated with him—three times. We may feel that Peter lacks courage; we

may question his commitment to the cause.

Or we can conclude that he is human. Maybe Peter wants to do the work of discipleship for the rest of what he hopes will be a long life. Like Peter, each one of us has to decide what following Jesus means for us. Not being willing to physically suffer or die for the gospel does not mean we lack commitment. It means that we, like Peter, are human. We don't want to suffer excruciating pain, and we don't want to die a premature death. Who does?

Though Peter denies even knowing Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion, after Jesus' resurrection Peter boldly embraces him and his ministry. We read in Acts that Peter does suffer for the gospel throughout his career as a disciple. But suffering is not his ultimate goal. Being faithful to the cause of Christ is. Our goal should be faithfulness to our calling in Jesus Christ. If our faithfulness is accompanied by persecution, God will give us the strength to endure.