

HOLY THURSDAY - March 20, 2008

Selections from Mark 14

A Weak Moment in the Life of _____

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Have you ever used this phrase: “I would never do that. I would never, ever, not in a million years, do that.” Have you said that? And then eat those words later on?

Eliot Spitzer sure has been in the news recently. Does that name sound familiar? Governor of New York? Well, ex-governor of New York. Got himself in a little trouble, he did. He got caught in a prostitution ring. Spitzer, a fighter for justice, a man of integrity, a government official who single-handedly fought organized crime in New York City and won, has fallen far from grace.

I imagine that Spitzer, a fighter for justice, said at one time in his life: “I would never, ever, not in a million years, be involved in something so scandalous, so appalling, that my family would suffer, that people’s rights would be violated, that my reputation would be tarnished. I would never do that to myself, my family, the people of New York, or to a population of people who are demoralized and oppressed.” “I would never do that,” Eliot Spitzer would say.

Ummm, a weak moment in the life of Eliot Spitzer.

Poor Marion Jones. She’s been in the news recently, too. Didn’t you just love her in the 2000 Olympics? She was on fire. She won 5 medals: 3 gold,

2 bronze. I loved watching her and I was so enamored with her smile and her spirit. When Jones was 12 yrs old, her dad died, and it was a turning point in her life. She discovered running and basketball – two areas where she excelled. She excelled because it was a release for her, an outlet for her grief. By the age of 15 she dominated California high school athletics both on the track and the basketball courts ... good enough to get a college scholarship. Good enough for some to take notice and say, ‘she’ll be in the Olympics.’

This year, Marion Jones was stripped of all Olympic medals and officially disqualified from her appearance in both the 2000 and the 2004 Olympics. She is banned from attending all future Olympic games. She’s lost everything because of her involvement with performance enhancing drugs. It is now said of Marion Jones: She will be remembered as one of the biggest frauds in sporting history. What a fall from grace.

I imagine that this dedicated and disciplined athlete said at one time in her life: “I would never, ever, not in a million years, take anabolic steroids. I love the sport too much, I love what I can do as a gifted and talented athlete. I would never want to hurt my image as a drug-free athlete.” “I would never do that,” Marion Jones would say.

Ummm, a weak moment in the life of Marion Jones.

Then there’s Peter. Poor Peter. Jesus says to his disciples: "you will all fall away. You will all mess up.”

And Peter's there, listening to this. And he replies: "Whatttt? I left everything to follow you! Don't you be telling me that I'm going to fall away. Yeah, okay, there have been times when I messed up. Okay, there have been times I've put my foot in my mouth. Yeah, okay, there have been times when I have failed to understand just exactly what we're doing here, but fall away? No, not me. I would never fall away ... never."

And Jesus says, "Oh, Peter." I think Jesus said that a lot. "Oh, Peter, yes, you will. You will fall away. You – Peter – the most rock-solid disciple I have, you will disown me, not once, not twice, but three times."

And how does Peter respond? "Not me. Never. I would never, ever, not in a million years, deny knowing you."

And all the others – all the other disciples – said the same: we would never, ever, not in a million years, deny knowing Jesus.

When we're all together in the presence of the Lord, it's easy to talk big. It's easy to say, "I would never do that. I love Jesus too much. Even if everyone else were to fall away, I would never fall away! Never. Never."

When we're in the upper room with Jesus, hanging out with a few friends, it's easy to pledge our allegiance to Jesus Christ. This is our upper room, this is our church, our space, our worship, and here we are, pledging our allegiance to Jesus Christ. Out there ... that's a different story. Out there it's not so easy. Out there it's hell. Out there so many other things surround

us: Your marriage. Your job. Your children. Your problems. Your pressures. Your worries. Your image.

You know the rest of the story. The soldiers arrive and Jesus is taken into custody. And the disciples are so scared that they turn around and run for their lives. Jesus was right. They all fell away.

Peter's in the courtyard, warming himself by the fire. A servant girl looks at him closely, and says, "You were also with that Nazarene."

But Peter says, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Later on, she catches up with him by the entryway to the courtyard. And she says to the people standing nearby, "This guy ... he's one of them. He's a disciple."

And Peter says, "No I'm not!"

After a little while, some of the others say, "But you are one of them. You're a Galilean ... your accent, it gives you away."

And Peter responds: "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know this man. I've never, ever met this man before. I don't know him."

The rooster crows. And Peter remembers the words Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you, Peter, will disown me three times." Then Peter, realizing his failure, hangs his head and cries. Wow,

what a fall from grace.

Ahhh, a weak moment in the life of Peter.

It's easy for the armchair Christian to look at this and say, "Peter, you loser! What were you thinking? You were with Jesus for three years! You were a part of the group. You saw all the miracles! You heard all the teachings! How could you fail so miserably?"

Don't be too hard on Peter. Don't be too hard on the Eliot Spitzers or the Marion Joneses of this world. They, along with Peter, represent us. They represent our fears. They represent our struggles. They represent our desire to flee when the heat's turned up. They represent our need to deny any wrong we've committed and our failure to admit when we've made a mistake. They represent those who have fallen from grace.

I really know nothing about Eliot Spitzer or Marion Jones. I just pulled them from the news, but in my time of meditation, their names kept coming back to me and I finally figured out why. Because of my reaction when I heard how they had fallen from grace.

On TV, there stands Eliot Spitzer, next to his wife, the mother of his children, and I'm fuming. I don't know the man ... I don't live in New York, but I'm upset, so quick to judge. "How could you do that?," I'm saying to the television. "I probably would have voted for you. You're an embarrassment. Standing there next to your wife. If I were her, I'd leave you in heartbeat. I'd never, ever put up with you. What a loser."

Now, Marion Jones ... for me she represented a strong woman ... and I want my daughters and all our young women to see and witness and experience strong women. When she stepped up the microphone to admit to her wrongs, after she got caught, I was disappointed. "You deserve to be stripped of all your medals and awards, because you really let me down. You're a loser. What kind of a mother are you? What kind of a wife are you? You're a liar."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus meets up with Peter. And he doesn't say: "Peter, you're a loser. God and I both agree: you're fired." Instead, he tells Peter, "I'm giving you another chance. Take care of my lambs. Feed my sheep." In other words, "Yeah, you made some mistakes, I had some moments of disappointment, but, Peter, God's not through with you yet."

In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter two, Peter preaches one of the greatest sermons in Christian history. And 3000 people came to faith in Jesus Christ. Far cry from being a loser, huh?

On this Holy Thursday, we journey to the cross. The cross: it represents forgiveness and new life for US. I hope and pray that it can and does represent a second chance. We all make mistakes. We all struggle. We have all run away. We have all, at one time or another in our times, denied knowing the power of the love of Christ. We have all fallen, sometimes far from grace, but because of God's mercy, we get back up again ... because God isn't finished with us. God's not through with us. Thanks be to God for second chances. May it be so in our lives. Amen.