

March 25, Good Friday: John 18:1-19:42

## **There are many reasons to deny Jesus, and we all have one.**

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

The term *passing* refers to a person's ability to identify with and belong to one group, class, or—most often—race while secretly belonging to another. It implies an intent to deceive, which is why the illustration that may come to many people's minds—of Thomas Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemings—is not a case of passing. Hemings never claimed to be white nor denied being black, which is the primary reason their six children were and remain in the margins of Jefferson's public narrative. It was not Hemings herself but some of these children who disclaimed their heritage in order to enter white society. They were successful, and no one said a mumbling word.

One of my favorite stories of passing belongs to Long Lance, a writer for *Cosmopolitan* and spokesman for Indian affairs. Lance claimed to be the son of a Blackfoot chief. He was, in a 1920s magazine's opinion, one of the "few real 100% Americans" left, and his 1928 autobiography was an international best seller.

Except—well, have you ever told a lie that became too public and got exposed? Long Lance became a silent film star, and pretty soon people started fact-checking. Turns out he was born not in the Sweetgrass Hills of Montana but in North Carolina, and his name wasn't Long Lance but Sylvester Long, and his father wasn't a Blackfoot chief but a school janitor, and he wasn't Native American at all but Negro, through and through.

There are good reasons, it must be said, for denial. The "one drop rule" of the Deep South created the social stratification known as Jim Crow. (The rule applied only to black people, meaning you could be white and pass for black, which sometimes happened.) Being something other than black meant a job, education, and hope for survival. It meant privilege, a seat at the table, a greater chance at success. There's no way Beverly and Harriet Hemings were going to be slaves like their mother, no

way Sylvester Long was going to be a janitor like his father. Even my own family—which comes from Gulfport, Mississippi, and the creolized South—has among us members who made it to Chicago only because they could pass.

Passing offers one way of looking at Peter's triplicate denial of Jesus. He doesn't know for sure, but there's a chance he could be arrested; for certain he could be a lot less comfortable than he is by the cozy fire in the desert night. And just as there's a chance you are reading this only because of my ancestors' denial, there's a chance that the church wouldn't exist without Peter's attempt at passing—certainly not in its current form, for better or worse.

And Peter's isn't the only such denial—not when it's common for ministers to say we dread the inevitable “So what do you do?” question. Not when we sit at tables or on the Internet, sometimes among family and friends, and hear excruciatingly ignorant conversation—and say nothing in response. Maybe we don't want to start a debate—who has the energy for another argument? Maybe we don't want to risk a friendship by sharing our story. Maybe we want to increase our chances of success—at work, at flirting, wherever. Or maybe we just don't think it's relevant: our faith life and our public life are separate silos that feed us and never intertwine. When the opportunity comes we say, “I'll pass.”

There are many reasons to deny Jesus, and we all have one. We've all taken our turn at passing. But we should know that, for whatever good and bad reasons, it's not dangerous to be an American Christian. We should know that the fear of being labeled as “one of them” brings with it an opportunity to unpack people's pretensions and suspicions about faith. A respectful conversation with you might mean someone now knows a person who fears God but doesn't match their assumptions. Too many thoughtful believers are passing—denying opportunities to love and denying opportunities to describe that love using Christian language. If we're honest, we kind of like being indistinguishable. For some, it's a mark of a truly progressive faith—that we can blend in and cause no trouble.

When passing is infiltrated, there are costs—from Peter's shame to Sylvester Long's suicide in 1932. What is the cost of not being who we always are, all the time?

Peter had a good reason to remain silent. Most of us are less worried about keeping our toes warm or our necks attached to our heads; our faith is a matter of convenience and privilege. Good Friday is an opportunity to resist that easy move from Palm Sunday to Easter—to resist being, as Gardner Taylor often said, “a

resurrection people but not a crucifixion people.” It presses us to sit with the fact of Jesus’ suffering. He did not deny. He did not try to pass. What happens to the world around us, and within us, when we do?