

Fr. Curtis Miller August 8-9, 2020 Homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A friend recently pointed out that when we hear about saints, we usually just hear about how perfect they are, and it sounds impossible for any normal person to become a saint. But the truth is that saints don't start out as saints. They are not superhuman, born with halos around their heads. They all begin like you and me as ordinary people. And once the saints start following Jesus, they do not suddenly stop having problems. They continue to have struggles and doubts, sins and failures. So what makes them saints? It's that in the midst of struggles, they keep their eyes focused on Jesus, and when they fall, they ask Jesus to pick them back up again. That's what makes someone a saint. If perfection was the requirement for being a saint, then it would be impossible for any of us to become saints. But God calls each one of us to become a saint, to keep struggling, to keep trusting Him, and to cooperate with His grace to grow in holiness each day. If we had to become saints on our own, we would fail, but it is God Who is working in our lives to help us become saints, and with God all things are possible.

One of the saints we might be able to best relate to is St. Peter. We might think, "That can't be. Peter was Jesus' most important apostle, the first pope, and he lived two thousand years ago. What could I have in common with Peter?" As it turns out, a lot. Of all the apostles, Peter's humanity comes through most clearly in the Gospels.

Peter wasn't always a saint; he started out as a simple fisherman named Simon. When he first met Jesus, he had been having a bad day, after spending an unsuccessful night fishing. Having caught nothing, Simon was understandably skeptical and maybe a bit irritated when this stranger, a wandering preacher who was not even a fisherman, told him that he would catch something if he cast his nets on the other side of his boat. But here's the important thing about this man who would become a saint: Despite his skepticism and irritation, he could sense that there was something special about this Jesus, and so he did what He commanded, casting his nets onto the other side. We know the rest of the story. He caught so many fish that he had to call out for help from his fellow fishermen to pull in the catch. Immediately, Simon falls down on his knees before Jesus, saying, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." We don't know what sins Simon struggled with, but we do know that he had the humility and the self-awareness to be able to admit this when he came face to face with Jesus. But Jesus did not go away; instead He called Simon to become His disciple. Without any hesitation, Simon left his nets and his old life behind, and he followed Jesus.

When Jesus comes into our lives, it's usually not at a convenient time. Often, it's at a moment when we feel our worst, stuck in our sins, failing at our daily tasks. Suddenly, Jesus comes to us, and we feel in our hearts that He is asking us to do something. We're tempted to put Jesus off, to tell Him that now is not a good time, or that we're not the right person to ask, that we're not holy enough to follow Jesus' call.

But we can also choose to be like Peter, acknowledging our imperfections, but boldly answering Jesus' call.

Boldness was one of Peter's defining characteristics. While Jesus is traveling with His disciples, He asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" They all report what others say about Jesus, that He is Elijah or some other prophet. Then Jesus asks them directly, "But who do you say that I am?" and everyone becomes bashful and silent...everyone except Simon, who boldly proclaims, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus praises him, and gives him his new name, Peter, which means "rock," because of the solidity of his faith. But Peter's boldness can sometimes get him into trouble, as when he rebukes Jesus for saying that He will suffer and die. Peter can't conceive of a suffering Messiah, and thinking that he knows better than Jesus, he tells Jesus that He must be wrong. Later, at the Last Supper, Peter boldly proclaims that he will never abandon Jesus, even if it means imprisonment or death. Just a few hours later, after Jesus' arrest, Peter fearfully denies three times that he even knows Jesus. After Jesus' resurrection, Peter repents, telling Jesus three times that he loves Him.

Peter goes back and forth throughout his life, from boldly professing his faith that Jesus is the Messiah, to then saying or doing the wrong thing. Often, it's his fears that get in the way. Probably most of us can relate to this to some degree. We love Jesus, we believe in Him, we often work hard to what Jesus asks us to do, but then it all falls apart when we give in to our fears. This is all on display in today's Gospel reading, when the apostles see Jesus walking on the water. Most of the apostles are stupefied by this miracle, but Peter insists that Jesus invite him to walk on the water, too. With bold faith, Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. But then he starts to take his eyes off of Jesus, and instead focuses on the waves and the storm. He suddenly realizes that this is impossible; he can't walk on water, and he begins to sink. We do this a lot, too. We feel Jesus asking us to do something and we jump at the chance to serve Him, but then we give in to distraction, fear, and doubt. We begin to sink. But what does Peter do? He calls out to Jesus for help, and Jesus immediately saves him, pulling him out of the water and back into the boat.

What does this mean for us? None of us is perfect. Sometimes we'll try to do something for Jesus and we'll fail, but that doesn't have to be the last word. We can call out to Jesus for help, strength, and forgiveness. That's what Peter had to do, again and again, but because he had that humble trust in Jesus, and was willing to cooperate with God's grace, despite his many shortcomings, he became a saint. If we follow his example, God can help us become saints, too.