

SAINTLINESS

On this first Sunday of the Lenten season, it seems appropriate to turn to a passage in the Gospel of Mark. The narrator backs away from his intense focus on Jesus Christ, and reveals a scene in the background. It involves one of us: Simon, nicknamed *Petros*, the Rock. Saint Peter.

Mark 14:53-72 And they led Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes were assembled. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, and warming himself at the fire.

Now the chief priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, and their witnesses did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet not even so did their testimony agree.

And the high priest stood up in the midst of them, and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it these men testify against you?" But he was silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the high priest tore his mantle, and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" And the guards received him with blows.

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the maids of the high priest came; and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him, and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway. And the maid saw him, and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. And after a little while again the bystanders said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." And immediately the cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Two trials were taking place that night. One, up in a closed room: Christ before the chief priests, elders, and scribes. The other: down in the courtyard, the trial of someone's faith. In spite of the years that separate us, despite his unique position as an Apostle, Peter is very much like you and me.

A few soldiers huddle around a little fire. The pre-dawn air of early spring is damp and chilling.

Peter arrives, discretely, a shadow among shadows.

He had been following far behind Jesus and seems to be nothing more than a stranger who happens to be passing by—apparently unaware of the great drama taking place inside.

The soldiers part a little to make room for him at the fire. No one is very talkative. Peter waits.

A balcony runs around the courtyard on three sides. A door suddenly opens, and there, on the balcony, is Jesus. Laughing, mocking guards push him along to another room. He is offering no resistance. It is obvious that he doesn't have a chance.

Simon Peter shudders and pulls a blanket up over his shoulders and head.

A little girl comes out, one of the maids who waited on the high priest. In the flickering light of the fire she recognizes the Big Fisherman. "Why, you are one of those with the Nazarene," she blurts out, pointing directly into his face. "You are with him."

Peter's heart pounded twice when it should have hit only once. Without thinking, he put on a calm, indifferent expression and said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Trying to look more bored and annoyed than frightened, he stood up and walked away from the fire. He found a place dark enough to conceal him, a place where he could be alone.

The first faint glimmer of gray on the eastern horizon promised a new day, albeit, not a pleasant one. Off somewhere in the distance a rooster crowed.

It came like a stab in the pit of his stomach.

He remembered something that Jesus said when speaking to the crowds: "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father."

Have you ever been ashamed of him?

Has your connection with his church ever made you uncomfortable?

Maybe Christ has never had you with him in a life-threatening situation, but how different is your experience from Peter's?

Have you ever wished to avoid admitting how you really feel about something when just about everyone else present felt another way?

Do you prefer to let it be known that you take your religion with a grain of salt?

Have you ever been with congenial friends engaging in malicious gossip?

Or at a meeting where less than ethical plans were being laid?

Have you ever found yourself in any such circumstance and said to yourself, “Well, I know this is wrong. I feel uncomfortable about it. But I wouldn’t want to cross the wrong person, or seem like a prude. Either they would laugh at me, or I’d alienate them. I’ll just hold my peace.”

Have you ever been there?

Then maybe you are willing to believe that it was real blood throbbing through the veins of this confused disciple.

Peter had been willing to storm a beach,
Or wrestle a lion,
Or take on the Roman army.

But to admit openly that he was a friend and follower of a weak and ridiculed prisoner whose cause had obviously flopped, took more than he possessed to deliver. Few of us ever get excited about being on a losing team—which is too bad, really.

And yet, we call this frightened,
Selfish,
Insecure,
Uncertain,
Cowering,
Stumbling man,
a “saint.”

We make a serious mistake today when we think of a saint as a person who does no wrong, is pure and good to the core, and lives the perfect life of holiness. A great-grandmother, confined to her rocking chair, we call, “saintly.”

Saints are entirely human. We put them in stained glass windows, carve statues of them, and erect churches in their names. We have sought every way possible to isolate them from ourselves and to make them something other than we are.

We say to ourselves, “They did not know the pressures we know or experience the stresses of everyday life.”

For where in the New Testament has a saint ever had to contend with the customer who wants to push an overflowing basket through the express lane?

Which one of them sweated out April 15?

Where is the saint whose satellite goes out at the two minute warning with the score 14 to 12?

When were their flights ever an hour late?

They are simply too distant from our concerns to have any kinship with us. Times have changed.

We push the saints as far from us as we can place them. That way, we do not have to aspire to be what they are. We protest, "I'm no saint," and that seems to excuse us.

To bring about the final separation between ourselves and the saints of the New Testament, we paint lovely, but absurd, pictures of them and space them between the pages of our Bibles. The Sunday School pictures I was shown as a child taught me that a saint was someone whose feet barely touched the ground (*so surely he never stumbled*), was clothed in yards of fine linen (*which never got dirty*), and whose facial expression indicated chronic indigestion!

If we will take the time to read about the saints in the Bible, we will quickly discover they are quite ordinary people. Read about St. Peter, or St. Paul, or St. Mark, or any of the others. The stories of their becoming saints overflow with details that would make us vote against them if they were running as candidates for sainthood.

It is not so much the quality of their behavior as it is the fact that they were called by God, and were willing to answer affirmatively, and gave such as they had. The only thing that makes them different is the fact that they are touched with a commitment to Jesus Christ.

They still face temptation, perhaps even more than others.

Sometimes they give in to it.

On the other hand, a person may live what appears to be a decent life, is kind and thoughtful and generous, never breaking the law—and yet be no saint, because there is a lack of motivating relationship with Jesus Christ.

Hagios is the New Testament Greek word that translates into English as *saint*. It appears sixty-two times. Paul addresses letters to "all the saints" in a particular location. Linguistically it means "separate from common condition and use; dedicated, hallowed,"

but Paul uses the word as an equivalent for “church members”—all of us who are a part of the Body of Christ.

It is getting light now. The cloak of darkness no longer hides sufficiently. The little maid, perhaps in all innocence, keeps talking, prying, prodding. I can imagine her muttering to bystanders as she went about her duties. “This man is one of them, I’m sure of it. I just know he is.” When they look at him for a response, Peter shakes his head and quietly denies any knowledge of what the girl is prattling about.

But the people who had gathered to watch the show and shake an angry fist began to wonder about Peter. Fixing their attention on him, they began to press him for facts. “Surely you are one of them. You are a Galilean. I can tell it by the way you talk. Your speech betrays you; your Galilean accent gives you away.”

Like a cornered animal, Simon Peter flushed with fear and anger. He began to curse himself and to swear, “I tell you, I do not know the man you are talking about!”

And almost as if on cue, the dawn’s rooster crowed a second time.

Peter remembered how Jesus had said, “You will all fall away; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’”

But Peter had taken exception. “No Lord,” he had protested, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” And Jesus had said to him, “I tell you this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.”

And Peter had said *vehemently*, “If I must *die* with you, I will not deny you!”

And now the unthinkable was reality. Peter had behaved exactly as Jesus had figured he would.

So it was no surprise to Jesus, who (according to Luke) came out on the balcony now and looked at Peter.

Looked at him standing there bathed in the resounding echoes of his own voice, denying.

And in Christ’s face, Peter did not see hostility,

Or bitterness,

Or an “I told you so” expression.

He saw the pain of disappointment,

Mingled with compassion.

And Peter turned free,

And went out speechless,

And wept bitterly.