

Fr. Curtis Miller

January 28-29, 2023

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

As St. Paul reminds us in today's second reading, from his First Letter to the Corinthians, God did not call any of us to follow Him because we are better than other people. Indeed, "not many of you were wise, [nor] powerful, [nor] of noble birth." God calls us to Himself, not because we've earned it, but because He loves us, as imperfect as we are. That's a humbling thought. If God loves us in spite of our shortcomings and our sins, then shouldn't we be willing to accept each other, despite similar shortcomings?

We don't have to "pad our resumes" to impress God, like a puffer fish, filled with air. Think about how people present themselves on social media or dating profiles. Everything is presented in the best possible light, or embellished, or is an outright fabrication. We don't have to be that way with God. He knows everything about us. We hold no secrets from Him. This is liberating. We can be ourselves with God, humble and honest before Him. The hardest part of this, however, is to acknowledge that we are sinners. I'll get back to this point in a moment, but forgive me as I take you back to your high school English class.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Young Goodman Brown," the title character is a young Puritan living in colonial Salem, Massachusetts. He's a righteous, upstanding man, in the midst of a community of other righteous, upstanding citizens. One day, he tells his wife, Faith, that he must leave on a mysterious errand that night in the forest. Soon, Brown encounters a mysterious figure in the woods, who is clearly the devil. Brown steels himself to resist the devil's temptations, but inexplicably, Brown accepts the devil's invitation to walk along and converse with him. Realizing that the devil is leading him far down a dark path, the young man insists that he will stop, protesting that none of his family would have ever kept such wicked company. The devil laughs at this, saying that he knew Brown's father and grandfather, and he aided them in committing secret acts of violence and evil during their lifetimes. Brown doesn't want to believe him, but he continues to walk along with the devil. Soon, they come upon other people travelling along the same path in the woods, and Brown is shocked to recognize several upstanding members of his community: town selectmen, the minister and deacon, and even the elderly woman who taught him his catechism as a child. He sees a large throng of people, all whom Brown had thought of as good righteous people, hurrying deeper into the dark woods. Brown is ready to turn back, but he thinks he hears the voice of his wife in the crowd, and so out of curiosity he continues to follow the others. In horror, he comes upon a witch's sabbath in the woods, attended by all these people he had thought of as good and pious. Brown sees his wife, coming to be initiated into the ranks of sinners among this hellish scene, and he cries for her to look to Heaven and resist the devil. He doesn't get to see her response. In that moment, Brown awakens, alone in the woods, as if from a nightmare. Returning to Salem in the daylight, he again sees all these seemingly righteous people, going about the day as normal, and he is suspicious of them all, even his own wife. The story concludes, saying that for the rest of his years, Brown was a bitter and unhappy man. It's a dark and troubling story, to say the least. Was Brown's vision reality, or was it a deception of the devil? Either way, Brown's realization that all the seemingly good people in his community could be wicked sinners, forever changed the way he saw them, and he always looked at them with a suspicious eye.

While none of us has probably ever had a disturbing vision like that of Young Goodman Brown, we can face the same temptation to become self-righteous and judgmental when we realize that the

people around us are sinners. The news is filled with salacious stories of the sins people commit. An essential antidote to this response is to recognize in humility that we ourselves are sinners, too. That is why we begin every Mass by calling to mind our sins and asking God to have mercy on us.

Part of the devil's power comes from us, when we hide our sins. What did Adam and Eve do the moment after they ate the forbidden fruit? They hid from God. Why? Because in sinning, their vision of God became distorted. They saw Him, not as a loving Father, coming to pick them up, but as a cruel ogre, coming to punish them. Sin distorts our image of God. When we sin, we hide from God and from each other out of shame. Sometimes, we even hide our sinfulness from ourselves in denial. But this prevents us from honestly grappling with our sins, and from getting help to overcome them. Sometimes, we might hide our sins because we're afraid that if anyone found out, then we would have to stop our sinful behavior. This happens when sin takes deep root and we're addicted to it. In all these cases, we have to put in more and more effort to carefully craft masks and facades that hide how much we're actually struggling. And these facades never hold up long. But by openly acknowledging that we are sinners, as we do at the beginning of every Mass, we rob the devil of his power. By confessing our sins to the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God breaks the hold sin has on us. The scales fall from our eyes, and we again recognize God as our merciful Father.

One of the consequences of sin is that it erodes the confidence we have in each other. Every time I sin, I realize more deeply that I am capable of evil, and I start to suspect that other people are also similarly capable of evil. That's one of the corrosive effects of sin. In Hawthorne's story, Brown lost his faith in his fellow men when he saw that all these people pretending to be good were actually evil sinners. But when we come here to Church, the opposite can happen. We don't have to pretend to be better than we are. We can honestly acknowledge, in a supportive community of fellow penitents, that none of us is perfect. Ironically, it is in acknowledging that we are sinners that we take the first step away from sin. This is only possible in the light of the redemption Jesus won for us on the cross. None of us has to justify ourselves; only Jesus can justify us, unworthy as we may be.

The German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book, *Life Together*, that in many Church communities, everyone pretends to be a perfect Christian. "Hence all have to conceal their sins from themselves and from the community... So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy." The Gospel, however, convicts us of the truth that we are all sinners, yet also invites us, "Come, as the sinner that you are, to your God who loves you" and forgives you. "You cannot hide from God. The mask you wear in the presence of other people won't get you anywhere in the presence of God. God wants to see you as you are, and to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and to other Christians as if you were without sin." "Sin wants to remain unknown," Bonhoeffer continues, "It shuns the light." But "in confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness" and God bestows forgiveness.

As a final thought: Give the Sacrament of Reconciliation/ Confession a try. I know that it is the neglected sacrament. It's humbling and can be awkward, but it brings healing on a deeply personal level. It reminds us that God doesn't just forgive some vague sinners "out there, somewhere." God forgives me, personally, individually, with infinite love. That's not a bad bargain for a little bit of humility.