

We had a couple of opportunities this week to “critique” Saint Peter’s behavior and performance. When we celebrated the Transfiguration of Jesus on Thursday, I reminded us all that if we set ourselves up as judges over Peter or the other Apostles, we need to ask ourselves, “Would I have done any better?” I took the liberty of answering for all of us: “No. We would not.” Generally speaking, we have a tendency to judge previous generations according to the standards of our day. That is a very foolish thing for us to do. In many cases, we know their mistakes, what led to the mistakes, and we often know how to avoid those mistakes. When we then repeat those mistakes, doesn’t that make our mistakes worse than theirs? Something to think about.

In the case of Peter’s adventures on the sea, Jesus was disappointed in Peter’s failure, right? Not the way I read that account. Here is how I read this gospel—and my reading is based in part on the reflections of Saint Charles de Foucauld, a French priest who lived as a hermit among the Tuareg people of the Sahara until he was killed by a bandit.

Peter did almost everything right. For some reason he wanted to walk out to Jesus on the rough sea. Having received that inspiration from somewhere, he first asked permission: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come out to you.” Anytime we consider a major project or discern the next step in our vocations, we need to do the same thing: ask God before we act. Having asked for permission, Peter waited for a response; he didn’t just jump out and start walking. That is also a critical step in discernment; we also need to wait for the Lord to respond. This is where having faithful people who know us and in whose judgment we trust can be very helpful; they can help us figure out how the Lord is responding to our request. Jesus then said, “Come.” Peter responded immediately. He didn’t waffle or change his mind. He anticipated John Wayne’s definition of courage: “Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway.” Having received the green light from Jesus, Peter courageously and immediately jumped out of the boat and started walking. When we ask the Lord and he says yes, we need to summon the courage, saddle up, and start riding. And Peter was successful. With full faith in God, he strode across the rough waves, supported, of course by the God in whom he placed all his trust. But then he looked away from Jesus, realized what he was doing and got scared. Again, though, he did exactly the correct thing: He cried out, “Lord save me!” and Jesus rescued him.

Jesus then said: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Was Jesus disappointed? Yes. Was he disappointed in Peter or disappointed for Peter? Getting into Jesus’ head is a dangerous thing to do but here is how I think Jesus

experienced this sequence of events. Peter wanted to come out to him. “Ok Pete, if you want to give it a try, let's see what happens. Come on out here.” Peter started walking. Again, I am going to do something risky. Picture this. We are on the planet Dagobah. Luke Skywalker's x-wing has just sunk all the way into the swamp. He argues with Yoda about whether or not he can get it out. He says: “I will try.” Yoda replies: “Do or do not, there is no try.” Luke lifts up his hand, calls upon the Force, and the x-wing starts to rise. Yoda's eyes get bigger and bigger, his ears start to point upwards. Artoo Detoo squeals in wonder. Then...the x-wing sinks back into the swamp. Luke falls to the ground exhausted and complains to Yoda; “You want the impossible.” Jesus is watching Peter walk towards him. His eyes grow wide, his heart beats faster, and he's thinking “Oh wow! Pete's actually doing it! Come on buddy!” And then...”Awww, dang it. Pete! You were so close, You almost had it. Well, next time maybe you will do better.” There will be plenty of next times for Peter to work on getting things right...and eventually he will.

“Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus was disappointed for Peter, not in Peter. Those are words of correction, not condemnation. In asking to come out to Jesus, Peter showed a lot more courage than his buddies in the boat. Jesus—knowing Peter—may have had a feeling that things wouldn't go so well, but you have to start somewhere.

We can learn from Peter's success and his mistakes. When we are inspired to do something, ask God first and then wait for him to respond. Remember though that God speaks in whispers, not shouts—we have to pay attention or we might miss what he wants to tell us. When he answers us, we need to act in faith that although the path will be difficult, God will give us the strength we need to see it through. When things get too much for us, cry out to Jesus to save us and he will do it. If we hear him say to us “Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?” he is not condemning us, he is not disappointed in us, he is disappointed for us and he will continue to work with us so that next time, maybe we can do better. This is a lifelong process. With Jesus' help we will do better and better and hopefully keep walking until we find ourselves in heaven.