

Deacon Randy Perkins
Isaiah 22: 19-23
Romans 11: 33-36
Matthew 16: 13-20

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
EPIPHANY CATHOLIC CHURCH

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The name Wilma Rudolph probably doesn't mean anything to you. Wilma's early life was all too common of a circumstance. Wilma was born prematurely in 1940 and grew up in a poor family in Tennessee. As a child, she suffered from all kinds of illnesses, most impactfully polio. As a black child in the segregated South, her access to quality healthcare was significantly restricted. She couldn't walk without wearing a brace on her left leg, and she wore it all throughout her early years. Doctors told Wilma's mother that she would never walk normally and might always need the brace.

Mom wasn't buying it. She refused to accept that Wilma wasn't capable of walking and running and playing like a normal little girl. Despite their life circumstances, Wilma's family would not accept the *status quo* for her. Wilma underwent years of therapy and learned all kinds of exercises to strengthen her leg. With a lot of hard work, self-determination, and family support, Wilma eventually walked without the brace.

Then she began to run. And, did that girl run!

In the 1960 Rome Olympics, the poor little Tennessee girl who had once struggled just to walk became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field at a single Olympic Games.

Imagine seeing Wilma Rudolph when she was five years old—her leg in a brace, weakened by polio—and someone telling you, "There stands a future Olympic champion." Reasonable people would have laughed. Because it's our *human* instinct to look at people as they are and decide right then what they're capable of becoming. But our human instinct is not *God's* instinct.

That's not how God looks at us, and today's gospel illustrates that perfectly. We heard Jesus establish Simon Peter as the head of the church, our first Holy Father. No one would ever have expected Simon, now Simon Peter, to become the leader of this new, emerging Jesus movement. Jesus

first encountered Peter on the banks of the Jordan River. He was a working-class fisherman from Judea. In the Acts of the Apostles, Jewish leaders describe him as “uneducated and ordinary.”

But the man who respected Jewish society labeled “uneducated and ordinary” was seen very differently by Jesus. The powers that He saw, a run-of-the-mill fisherman, Jesus saw a fisher of men! Jesus saw a man whose ministry would help change the course of human history. Jesus saw a rock! He named him Peter, a name derived from the Aramaic word for “rock.” “And so, I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Peter didn’t magically transform into a flawless, mistake-free leader. In fact, just three verses after handing Peter, “the rock,” the keys to the kingdom, Jesus called him “Satan.” He handed the keys to the kingdom to a man He knew would deny Him not once but three times when things got too heated. Not exactly what most would describe as a rock.

But God has an extraordinary habit of looking at people who seem too weak, too inexperienced, too flawed, too ordinary, or too broken for the task—and calling them anyway. When Jesus said, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,” He was saying in other words, “Peter, I know who you are. I know your weaknesses. I know the mistakes you haven’t even made yet. And I still choose you.”

As the old saying goes, “God doesn’t call the qualified. God qualifies the called.”

Peter isn’t unique. Saint Paul spent years persecuting Christians, but Jesus saw beyond the persecution. Jesus saw passion! Jesus didn’t write Paul off for his past mistakes, He transformed those mistakes and used them as the foundation of a ministry that carried Christianity to a whole new world of non-Jewish people.

The great prophet Moses lived in the house of Pharaoh, the same king who enslaved the Israelites. Moses had a horrible stuttering problem. On top of that, he had killed an Egyptian man in a fit of rage. Definitely not a clear and apparent choice to negotiate the Israelites’ release from captivity. But God saw beyond the struggles and failures, and the rest, as they say, is history.

When Jesus looked at Peter, he didn’t just see the mistakes Peter made or would make. He saw the person Peter was becoming. When Jesus looked at Paul, He didn’t just see his significant imperfections; He saw his tremendous potential. In Moses, God didn’t see a stuttering hothead. God

saw a slave-freeing hero. In Wilma Rudolph, God didn't see a second-class crippled child. God saw a record-setting Olympic champion.

These stories should give us great hope. We know all our flaws better than anyone else does. We know the things we wish we hadn't said. We know the opportunities we missed. We know the promises we made and didn't keep. We know our sins, our weaknesses, our insecurities, and our regrets.

Left to our own devices we can get so bogged down in our own humanity, or in other people's humanity, that we lose sight of the reality that God loves us just the way we are, because God understands that we are all works in process, all still working to become the person God wants us to be.

That's the history of our church. From its founding it's been a community of St. Peters—people who love Jesus deeply yet sometimes get things terribly wrong. People who feel courageous one day and cowardly the next. People who fall down but get back up. People who sin and seek forgiveness. Jesus continues building the Church through people like that. Through people like you and me.

So, this week and beyond let's try and look at ourselves the way God looked at Peter, and Paul, and Moses, and Wilma.

Maybe there's something you did that you've never forgiven yourself for doing. God has forgiven you!

Maybe there's a weakness you keep struggling with. God doesn't just see your slipup. God sees your struggle. God loves you no less because of your failures.

Maybe you look around and see people who seemingly have their lives all nicely put together while yours is coming apart at the seams. Remember, Jesus is at His best when we're at our worst!

The Gospel isn't a story of perfect people doing extraordinary things for God. It's the story of ordinary people allowing an extraordinary God to work through them.

Jesus looked at an uneducated, ordinary fisherman who would eventually deny him three times and said, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." Just as certainly, Jesus looks at each one of us—with all our gifts, all our weaknesses, all our successes, all our failures, all our faith, and all our doubts, and says, "I know you aren't perfect. That's ok. Just keep following me. Keep getting back up. Keep trying. Give me what you have. And watch what I can build with it."

