

[Isaiah 35:4-7a; Ps. 146; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37]

Looks can be deceiving. We look at a well-dressed man in a hospital wearing a white coat and assume he is a doctor. We look at someone expensively dressed and assume that she is rich. We look at someone dressed inconspicuously and assume that he is middle income.

The first situation happened to me when a fellow seminarian and I travelled to Assisi many years ago. After a full morning of sight-seeing, we decided to share a small pizza with mushrooms. As we both dug in, Ron asked me what was on the pizza. I said, "Mushrooms." He said, "It tastes like fish, and I am deathly allergic to fish, and I don't have my antidote with me." Turned out that the mushrooms were, in fact, anchovies. Also turned out that if I didn't get Ron to the emergency room within a half hour, he would die. We frantically raced around the streets of Assisi looking for a hospital and a doctor.

At the emergency room, in my best Italian, I spent five minutes trying to convince a man in a white coat that we needed immediate attention. After listening patiently, he said to me, "then you must see a doctor. I am the janitor." We finally got Ron the attention he needed. And he didn't die, thank God.

Two parishes ago, I commented on how elegant one of the older women parishioners looked in her expensive, name brand outfit. She did a perfect model sweep and said, "Oh, this? I picked it out at the Salvation Army for ten dollars!"

Three parishes ago, at a Christmas party hosted by a wealthy member of the Altar Guild, as I was making my excuses at the end of the evening and started heading for the door, a simple, unassuming man who had just arrived late was picking through the hors d'oeuvres. I passed him quickly and said a perfunctory, "Hello and Good-bye, I'm Fr. Nick." He graciously shook my hand and said, "Hello, Father, I'm John Ricardo." I didn't realize who he was until I got into my car that he was at that time, the chairman of the Chrysler Corporation!

Our readings today remind us that looks can be deceiving. St. James reminds us not to judge by outward appearances. Someone dressed poorly may be rich in the Holy Spirit and God's good graces.

Today's Gospel has another miraculous healing by Jesus. But He heals not a blind man, not a cripple. This is the only story in all four of the Gospels where Jesus heals a man who is deaf. It is curious that this is the only healing of a deaf person. It is curious that Jesus uses the same medicine he uses on the blind man – spit. Yuk! More amazing is that Jesus creates the miracle with one word: "Ephphatha!" Which means, "Be open!" Good words to ponder.

When I had my final visit 16 years ago with my dear friend and spiritual director Barbara, who was dying of cancer, I asked her for her final message to me. What words of wisdom can Barbara give me to help me on the rest of my journey of faith as she was about to end hers? She looked at me, puzzled by the question and said, "I hadn't thought about that." Then she closed her eyes, lowered her head and said simply the words that Jesus says to us today: "Be open." Be open. I took that to mean, be open to the message of the Gospel. Be open to the lessons of life. Be open to the surprises that God has in store for me. Be open. Questions to reflect on this week: How have you "been open?"

Where have you felt God has liberated and healed you?

When has God opened your ears to something you had not heard before, your lips to something you had not said before, your eyes to something you had not seen before? You heart to what you have never felt before?

When have you experienced spiritual or material poverty? How has this poverty showed you how to be rich in faith?

Be open. Be open to the Spirit. These words were said to each one of us on the day of our baptism. Our ears and our mouths were touched as the priest or deacon said these words of what is called the Ephphatha Prayer: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father." Maybe Jesus is asking us again to "Be Open." To be open to learn our faith more deeply. To HEAR His Word, to DO His Word through works of Mercy, and to BE His Word in our tired, lost and lonely world! AMEN!

[Readings: [Isaiah 50:4c-9a; Ps. 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35]

As I was praying over the readings for this Sunday, preparing my homily, I had a hard time reconciling the refrain for today's Responsorial Psalm 116: "I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living." Shouldn't Jesus be leading me into eternity as the Good Shepherd? Then I thought in my creative imagination that one day, God willing, Jesus, always the Gentleman, would be standing at the Pearly Gates in Heaven, open wide, sweep His arm towards me and say, "After you, Nick!"

How providential that on this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, we should have as the punchline of today's Gospel these words of Jesus: "For whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it." We remember the victims of 9/11 who lost their lives – those who died that day, those who died later as a result of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and those who died from respiratory diseases after inhaling that gray debris smoke following the building collapses.

There has been a meme going around social media that says something like, "I want to go back to 9/12/2001." It isn't a call to reopen the wounds that were so fresh on the day after the unimaginable terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C. and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Instead, it is a reminder of how our nation came together -- to weep, to mourn, to pray. Knowing nowhere else to turn, our churches were filled with people seeking God's consolation. And for a time, our neighborhoods seemed like close communities once again. We were united by the tragedy. It was a terrible time, but one made a bit more bearable by our togetherness.

Twenty years later, many feel that we are hopelessly divided -- exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of 9/11, when it felt that the world had been shaken to its core, the U.S. bishops issued a pastoral letter that called Catholics back to the basics. They encouraged prayer, weekly fasting and an understanding of what the Church teaches and why.

They invited the faithful to engage in dialogue with those who are different from them, and to witness to the Church's teaching on the dignity of all human life, justice and peace. More than anything, the bishops called Catholics back 'to God and to one another in hope,' adding that 'hope assures us that, with God's grace, we will see our way through what now seems such a daunting challenge.'

This is the message we need to hear today, too. Rather than giving into the discord that is running rampant in society, Catholics must return to the basics: prayer, fasting, love of neighbor, dialogue, the truth of Church teaching." We, like St. James, can show the faith which is the foundation of the "works" we do for ourselves, for others, for the Church, for the larger community.

The reason why we grow in faith as a Catholic Christian community is not only in the worship we give God here every week, but also in the work we do with our head, our hearts and our hands. Any responsible Christian steward who has sacrificed their time and talent for St. Martin's has grown spiritually from the experience.

Every one of us has a special gift, a special talent, or even several gifts and talents which we cannot keep hidden under a bushel barrel. We are invited, called and challenged to share those gifts with the community. We do this first as an expression of gratitude to God, Who cannot be outdone in generosity. We do this secondly, to show our personal value and worth as a baptized believer who puts their faith into action.

Finally, we do this as a witness to others in the community who may be struggling with their own identity, with their own faith, with their own search for meaning in life. And, may I also add that we honor those who have died on September 11<sup>th</sup>, by living lives of ministry and service to others. We honor the heroes of 9/11 by becoming the spiritual heroes of our Catholic faith.

In today's Gospel, Jesus Christ asks you and me one of the most important questions we will ever face: "Who do YOU say that I am?" Who IS Jesus Christ for you?

Fr. Ed Beck is a Passionist priest who coordinated the weekly televised Sunday Mass out of New York. He is a handsome man, with prematurely white

hair, and steel gray-blue eyes. One day, while travelling the subway from his office to his parish, a stranger kept staring at him and then finally approached him. He shouted, "You're HIM! You're HIM!"

The stranger frantically searched for a pen and paper and said, "I need your autograph, man!" Fr. Beck, not accustomed to this attention replied, "Well, I don't usually do this, but OK." He signed the small piece of paper, "Fr. Ed Beck, CP." The stranger looked at the piece of paper and said, "Fr. Ed Beck? Who's Fr. Ed Beck? I thought you were Anderson Cooper from CNN!"

The stranger did not know who Fr. Ed Beck was.

Do we know who Jesus Christ is?

So, who is Jesus Christ for YOU? What is Jesus asking you and your household to do? How is Jesus asking you and your household to respond to His invitation to take up your cross and follow Him? The question is not, "Should I serve St. Martin de Porres Parish? But rather, "HOW am I, how are we, going to serve St. Martin's? And how much are we going to serve God through our parish?

Each one of you are loved and each one of you are needed!

Say "Yes" when you are called! AMEN!

[Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Ps. 54; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37]

Who is called to be the “first and best” teachers of the Catholic Faith to our children? Who is given this responsibility, this challenge and this mission?

It’s not the priests and the nuns. It’s not the catechists whom we bless today. It’s not even the Pope himself. It’s mom and dad. It’s grandma and grandpa. It’s the parents and guardians of our youngest parishioners.

Your pastor, your parish staff, and your parish catechists are the SECONDARY teachers of your children in the ways of faith. We ADD TO what you should be providing at home. We work together in a partnership of teaching. You are the meat, we are the gravy. You are the cake, we are the frosting.

Bishop Robert Baron, an Auxiliary Bishop from Los Angeles, California, Shares these thoughts about today’s Catechetical Sunday. He says that a good catechist follows the Greek Philosopher Aristotle’s three-fold guide for teaching authentically: logos, pathos and ethos. These are not the names of the Three Musketeers, but translate in English as the word, the passion and the lifestyle.

First, the Word. Do we know our Catholic Faith well enough to accept it, to explain it, and to teach it to others? Each of our homes should have a Catholic edition of the Bible, a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and a list of Catholic websites to find the answers to the questions about our Faith that confounds us from time to time. Everyone should still be learning!

Second, the Passion. Are we passionate about our Catholic Faith? Do we take the Catholic knowledge we have and bravely share it with others? The most effective teachers of the Catholic Faith are those who are on fire with it. Our Faith is dynamic. The word dynamic has the same root word for dynamite. One Catholic author says about the unfortunate reality of most Catholics is that they hermetically seal their faith, put it in a can, and lock a lid on it. It’s time to blow the lid off of our Catholic Faith and let it explode in our homes, our parish and our society!

Third, the Lifestyle. Do our thoughts and attitudes, our words and actions reflect our Catholic Faith? Are we believers of integrity and trust? Are

we truly “Disciples of Jesus: Witnesses to the Gospel,” which is the theme for this year’s Catechetical Sunday? Young people can detect insincerity in us within seconds of talking with or listening to us.

Bishop Baron then spoke of the four questions that most young people, especially teens and young adults, fault us grown-ups for either their leaving the Catholic Church, their not investing in the Catholic Church, or their not trusting us adults, because the answers we give them are not sufficient to convince them of their truth. Here are the four questions:

How do we know that God exists?

If God exists, why is there evil in the world?

Why is the Catholic Church the only “true church” in the world?

Why do the teachings of the Catholic Church about sexuality hurt people?

Today we are treated to one of the most memorable moments of the teachings of Jesus. Today Jesus gives His disciples the correct answer to their quarrelsome discussion of who is the greatest. So what does He choose as His audiovisual prop, His mind-boggling and heartwarming example to make His point? He chooses... a child! A child. To teach His prestige-and-popularity-seeking pupils that they have their pecking order all wrong. They wanted to start at the top with the best and the greatest. But Jesus reverses the order and starts at the bottom with the worst and the least, namely a child.

We have to remember back then that a child was not seen as the clean, cute and cuddly kind. A child in the time of Jesus was the lowest of powerful humans. Powerless. Two thousand years ago, the infant death rate sometimes reached thirty percent of live births, and sixty percent of children were dead by the age of sixteen. Children were not even counted in the local census until they were twenty years old, and only then they counted only the males.

Yet, it is Jesus, the only begotten Child and Son of God, Who identifies Himself with the lowest and the least. And He says, “Whoever receives one such child as this in My name, receives Me.”

When we were children in my family, sometimes we would question why we had to do our chores, or when mom or dad said something we didn’t agree

with. When this happened, my mom would sit me down, put her hand on my shoulder and say, “My beloved son, when we say something to you that you don’t agree with or ask you to do your chores, it’s because we want you to accept more responsibilities and grow in doing your share of duties for the house. You may even learn a new skill which will help you when you are older. And you will form a deeper bond of love with your brother and your sisters.” [Long Pause...]

Nah, my mom never said that!! Most of the time she would shorthand her answer to this piece of advice: BECAUSE I SAID SO!!!

How many of YOUR parents responded the same way? How many of you responded to YOUR kids the same way? And when you did, did you phone your parents to apologize to them and them that they were right?

We need to listen more to our young people. To hear their questions not as a challenge to our authority, but as an invitation to seek together the truthful answers to life’s questions and to faith’s doubts. We do this as a witness to others in our community who may be struggling with their own identity, with their own faith, with their own search for meaning in life.

When a fight breaks out in a school yard, a bar, a sports arena or a prison yard, more often than not, a crowd gathers not to break it up but to watch. Some even join in. We let our lower passions get the best of us and rule over us. Our human instincts of jealousy and ambition, envy and covetousness challenge our designs on peace, respect, and taking care of the needs of others. These are the misguided passions St. James speaks about in today’s Second Reading.

If we dare to accept the challenge of Jesus to passionately proclaim and teach our Catholic Faith, we are put on a sure collision course with contemporary culture.

It won’t be easy. People will ridicule us, badger us, and even shame us into not doing what Jesus wants us to do. Look at the figure in today’s First Reading. The Suffering Servant will do just that, suffer. But even the evil ones who will do the inflicting of pain and suffering let words of truth slip out between their grinding teeth. “The just one is the son of God.” “God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes.” “We have proof of his gentleness and



patience.” “God will take care of him.” So it will be with us! If we just trust.

May Jesus, the Word made flesh, Mary, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom, St. Martin de Porres, and St. John Baptiste de La Salle, patron of teachers, pray for us, bless our catechists and young people, open our hearts, and bless and keep us safe as we accompany one another in our journey of faith, as we grow in our Faith, and as we share it with others. As Disciples of Jesus, and as Witnesses to the Gospel.” AMEN!

[Numbers 11:25-29; Psalm 19; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48]

Today is Priesthood Sunday, a day not only to pray for more vocations to the Priesthood of Jesus Christ, but to think about those priests who had an impact in our lives. I think in one of my previous Priesthood Sunday homilies, I mentioned who the top five priests of all time were in my life. Some of them have since died or have gotten older. I am flattered and humbled when people tell me that I have had an important spiritual impact in their lives. On the flip side, when someone says, "I don't go to church anymore because of Fr. Nick," it causes me to pause and to reflect.

My contemporary colleagues and I have gotten older-looking and heavier. We used to talk about favorite vacation spots and life events. Now we compare ailments and medical prescriptions. Yet most of the newly-ordained and recently-ordained priests of Detroit are fit and look like they just graduated from high school! Oy! When we used to gather before the pandemic, one of the issues we talked about was change. How priesthood has changed, how the Church has changed. Changes in the Church cause division among believers. It is a painful experience, one that at first glance should be avoided, discouraged and perhaps even crushed.

But having members in our Church that push for a clearer understanding of our teachings and practices may result in growth and development for the Body of Christ. Change is necessary for a growing body.

History has shown that change is usually difficult to accept, and those who push for radical change are often expelled, excommunicated or persecuted.

In two of our readings today we see changes happening in the outpouring and the action of the Holy Spirit. And we see how both Moses and Jesus are tolerant of those who do not fully fit the mold of the disciples. Moses and Jesus are entirely open to those who had not been recruited and trained in the "officially sanctioned and approved" methods and procedures of their religion.

These two great leaders both use the same criteria in judging whether to silence those who are accused of "rocking the boat" or to allow them to go

on their own way. Were these “disturbers” doing harm or doing good by their activities? Were they hindering or promoting God’s work?

Where and when have you received help – a “cup of water” -- from a surprising source? Where and when have you heard prophetic words in an unexpected place? Where and when have you seen the Spirit at work outside the faith community? What good have you seen the name of Jesus do?

When have you seen your riches get in the way of mercy and justice?

What are some changes that we clergy and lay people face today? In our day, there are some thirty million ex-Catholics in the United States. One in ten Americans once was a Catholic, but is no longer practicing the Catholic faith. We Catholics number the largest denomination of Christians in the United States. Former Catholics make up the second largest group. Why is that?

Yet, the Church in America continues to show signs of life and growth. There are more Catholics now per priest than there ever has been, largely due to the shortage of priests and an increase through participation in the RCIA – the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

This change from the American Church of the 1950’s and 1960’s can be seen as a great grace as more and more lay people step up to the plate to take on the legitimate ministry and service that is rightfully theirs by virtue of their baptism. Synod ’69 – an Archdiocesan-wide gathering in 1969 -- radically changed the complexion of our diocese and turned it into the most innovative dioceses in the country. Synod ’16, held five years ago, is doing the same now.

Being a practicing Catholic is no longer just about “pray, pay and obey.” Now, we are called to recognize that by virtue of our baptism, we have a dignity to pursue ministry and service in the Church. You should no longer see yourselves as mere volunteers and “Fathers Little Helpers,” but each of you is seen as a steward of God’s generous kindness to humanity and to the world, called to holiness, called to live out your mission by being proclaimers of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Who are the “little ones” Jesus is referring to in the Gospel? Those who turn to God and to us with a child-like trust and hope.

What do you make of Jesus saying, “Whoever is not against us is with us?” How do we show that we are “for” Jesus? How have we witnessed, as individuals and as a faith community, to our beliefs, our Christian actions and our commitment to be disciples of the Lord?

I find it thrilling that Mark includes this story about the fellow casting out demons outside the Jesus crowd. It should give hope to every parent worried that their children or grandchildren don’t go to church, are marrying outside the tradition, or espouse ideas that are unfamiliar or even frightening. Lots of good things happen outside the tent, as we see in our First Reading. What each of us should be most concerned about are the shortcomings in our own testimony.

Let us make our words the words of Saint Pope John XXIII:

“In essential matters, let there be unity;

In nonessential matters, liberty;

And in all matters, charity.”

And as Pope Francis says at the end of each of his Sunday Angelus talks:

“Non dimenticare a pregare per me. Buon Pranzo i Arrividerci.”

“Don’t forget to pray for me. Have a good Sunday dinner, and we will see you again.” AMEN!