

[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!