

[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 wearing a white coat and assume he is a doctor. We look at someone expensively dressed and assume that they are rich. We look at someone dressed inconspicuously and assume that they are middle income or even poor.

The first situation happened 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. Ron told me not to run because it increased his heart rate and spread the poison more quickly throughout his body. So we walked briskly like British joggers. "Heal, toe, heal, toe..."

At the emergency room, in my best Italian, I spent five minutes trying to convince a man in a long 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.

She did a perfect model sweep and said, “Oh, this? Sachs Fifth Avenue! I picked it out at the Salvation Army for \$10!” Three parishes ago, at a Christmas party hosted by a wealthy member of the Altar Guild, I was making my excuses at the end of the evening and started heading for the door, a simple, unassuming man 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 until I got into my car that he was at that time, the chairman of Chrysler Corporation!

Our readings today remind us that looks can be deceiving. Isaiah is speaking a word of hope to a nation that has been invaded and conquered for the umpteenth time. He speaks of a time and a place where there will no longer be any physical disabilities. A land which will be filled with lush vegetation and refreshing waters. 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!” “Open up!” Good words to ponder.

When I had my final visit ten 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 in prayer, and then 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.

I think of that whenever I officiate at a baptism. 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 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!

Today is Grandparents Day. Didn’t we just honor our Grandparents and elderly in July? We did. On the Sunday closest to the Feast Day of Saints Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary, and the grandparents of Jesus.

This world-wide observance was instituted by Pope Francis four years ago. And now, the American Bishops have designated the Second Sunday in September as *National* Grandparents Day. That must mean that Grandparents are twice blessed by God, right?

And so, I conclude on this Grandparents Day, with a brief

reflection.

As fun and special as time spent with grandchildren can be, we know that being a grandparent is a supporting -- and not a starring -- role. So, how can grandparents truly make a difference in their grandchildren's lives?

Grandparents have the unique opportunity to be holy role models by continuing to grow in their faith, and by teaching by living the values of the Gospel message in the following ways:

- Putting others first
- Accepting without judging
- Showing compassion to the needy
- Looking with awe at God's creation
- Living peacefully
- Having courage
- Being generous
- Being content with what you have
- Loving unconditionally
- Looking to the future with hope
- Being joyful
- And most importantly, expressing gratitude.

Happy Grandparents Day! AMEN!