

[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!

[Readings: Isaiah 50:5-9; Ps. 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35]

“We did all the right things,” said a mom of four grown children who have stopped practicing the Catholic faith. “We went to Mass as a family. We sacrificed to send them to Catholic school. They went to youth group. We did everything we thought we were supposed to do. What happened?” It’s one of the most common questions I get in every parish I serve. And it never gets any less heartbreaking. The Catholic Church is facing a spiritual epidemic. A recent study found that only 15% of children raised in Catholic homes will grow up to be practicing, faithful Catholic adults.

To find out why, and how to keep your kids Catholic, two major professional survey groups collected and reviewed data from 2,600 Americans, who successfully raised faithful adult kids. More importantly, they identified Catholic families that successfully raised all of their children to a faithful adulthood, and they interviewed both parents and faithful adult children from those families.

They found that, while things like regular Mass attendance, Catholic education, youth ministry and parish involvement were important, these families saw them as secondary and supportive of the way they lived their faith AT HOME. What happens at HOME makes all the difference.

When people hear us talk about the importance of living their faith at home, they imagine that these families are always on their knees in prayer, and somehow immune from the pressures of the real world. That is not true.

While families who successfully raised all of their children to a faithful adulthood did have regular family prayer times (usually some kind of morning, mealtime, and/or bedtime prayers), that does not appear to be the main factor responsible for their success.

What mattered most was a family dynamic in which the family (especially the children) experience their faith as the source of the warmth in their homes.

Children raised in these households experience their family’s faith as

something that draws them together in good times and bad. Your children are STARVING FOR FAITH!!! Your children are starving for the TRUTH!!!

What matters the most in homes and families are: healthy relationships with God and family members, family rituals, and a Faith that reaches out in service. Of course, these families faced the same stressors and conflicts that all families encounter. Still, they felt their family prayed about these problems in a way that led to better conversations and stronger relationships.

The Good News is that ANY family can learn these things. It's never too late. The more a family struggles to be happy, healthy and holy, the more they can benefit by cultivating the habits these families practice, which fall into three categories: **Relationships, Rituals and Reaching out.**

Relationships. Families are intentional about scheduling regular family time together and not letting extracurricular activities squeeze out time for things like family meals, a family day or other important family rituals throughout the week. These families allow their children to participate in activities in ways that support their family life rather than compete with it.

Families are generously affectionate. They often use the word "huggy" to describe their family dynamic. I often give "bear hugs" to those in need! With their permission, of course! These families practice gentle approaches when it comes to discipline. They create structures to encourage good behavior, and they do not shame their children for failures or use heavy-handed punishments. Instead, they treat misbehavior as an opportunity to teach better approaches to handling emotions or situations.

And when parents don't immediately know how to respond to their kids' questions or struggles, they work through things together. The kids feel "Listened to. Not "lectured to." One adult child said, "I was seen by my parents. I wasn't invisible to them. These practices help them share God's love with each other.

Rituals. Families have strong family rituals. They regularly work, play, talk and pray together. They assign individual chores, but they also have times when they work together as a family, washing dishes, cleaning up the house,

doing yard work or special projects together. They also have fun together regularly.

They use cell phone screens less often than they see other families doing. Instead, they play games and do activities together. I have been in a few homes where, when it is time to eat, everyone puts their phones in a small wicker basket and that's where they stay until after dessert!

This gives them the chance to talk about meaningful things like how God shows up for them or how they could take better care of each other. They schedule regular mealtimes, family meetings, parent-child dates and other times to make space for real conversation.

I was deprived of a parent-child date, one on one with either Mom or Dad. All of us kids were. I do remember, though, that when the four of us were still little kids, every night, Mom would come into our bedrooms, kiss each of us on the forehead and say, "You know, YOU are my favorite!"

Finally, **REACHING OUT**. The family prays together at home regularly. Many families in the study report some kind of brief morning time, mealtime and bedtime prayers. Perhaps pray the Rosary or a part of the Rosary. Families find little ways to make Christ a part of their family. Each member of the family asks Him for help throughout the day, thanking Him for blessings and trying to discern God's will for their family in big and small decisions.

Then, these families discuss ways they could be a blessing to others. They encourage good manners at home and with strangers. Friends, parents, kids, this is what you can do at home. All of this is what we call, "building up the Domestic Church."

Today is Catechetical Sunday, with this theme: "Lord, when did we see YOU hungry? We are hungry for God. The hunger is all around us.

In her bulletin article, Sandy reminds us that the word "catechesis" means, "to echo." Literally, we are to echo the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. This is not a suggestion; it is a command of our Lord. Parents are to be "the First and Best Teachers of the Faith," as I have outlined earlier.

In my pre-baptism classes, I remind the parents that they are “the meat” of faith and that we catechists are “the gravy.” That the parents are “the cake” and we catechists are just “the icing.” You cannot have gravy without the meat, and you cannot have icing without the cake!

To be a catechist is a privileged calling, and today we celebrate and thank them. All of us are called to echo and to share the Gospel message. We are the most important catechists to our children, our spouses, in the lives of our coworkers, our relatives, and our friends. Catechesis really begins in the heart. Yours and mine. It’s all about knowing and loving Jesus!

So, come and be fed! Bring your spiritual hunger to the table of plenty! And don’t forget when you leave here today, to bring Jesus HOME with you! Let Jesus make your relationships healthy, your family rituals holy, and your outreach to others fruitful! AMEN!

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

In case you haven't figured it out after my ten years of being here, God has blessed me with a very vivid and creative imagination and a well-developed sense of humor! This can be both a blessing and a curse. I visualize the people in today's Gospel amputating their hand, their foot and their eye. If we had to do that because of the sins we commit with our hand (touching something we are not supposed to, taking something we are not supposed to, striking someone with our hand), or because of the sins we commit with our feet (that take us where we should not go or where we should not be, or kicking another), or our eye (looking at stuff we are not supposed to be looking at), I picture us limping along, with one arm missing, and with partial blindness. The great diplomat from India, Mahatmas Gandhi famously once said, "If we always take an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, there would be a lot of blind and toothless people bumping into each other!"

One time when I was home for the weekend from the seminary, I was reviewing the Rite of Anointing of the Sick and the Last Rites. In the new ritual, all I anoint is the forehead and the palms of the hands. But in the old rite, all extremities were anointed along with the following prayer, "May God deliver you from all the sins you have committed with your mind, your eyes, your ears, your hands, your feet and your nose. I asked my mom who sitting nearby, "What sin can you possibly commit with your nose?" Without missing a beat, she said, "Sticking it someone else's business!"

This weekend in September has been designated for quite a while now as the weekend to take up as a special collection for the Priest's Pension Plan all across the Archdiocese of Detroit. This year's theme is "With Thanks for Their Service in Christ."

I thank all of the diocesan priests, who by "their service in Christ" shaped me and molded me into the priest that I am today. All of them have all gone to their eternal reward: Fr. Bohdan Kosicki, Fr. Leo Lulko, Fr. Ted Blaszczyk, Fr. Donald E. Bartone, and Monsignor Jerry Flanagan. Add Fr. Jim Sheehan, Bishop Ken Untener and Cardinal John Dearden. At age 70 in two weeks, I will now become one of those "senior priests." Younger priests have told me how I inspire them and give them hope... Plus a few laughs on the side!

Did you know that the street next to the church was named after then-Archbishop John Dearden? The story goes that Fr. Art Krawczak, the founding pastor of this parish, had just completed this church building and it was ready for the dedication. Having great political influence at the time, he convinced the City of Warren officials to designate the street next to our church as Dearden Street.

Fr. Art made sure the street sign was up when the Archbishop arrived. Fr. Art pointed out the roadway honor. Archbishop Dearden was appreciative but not amused. He looked up and down the street, smiled with a twinkle in his eye and said to Fr. Art, "It is only one block long and it is a dead-end street. Bishop Schoenherr's street stretches out for miles and covers two counties!"

My priest colleagues have gotten older-looking and heavier. Yet most of the newly-ordained and recently-ordained priests of

Detroit are fit and look like they just graduated from high school! One of the issues we talk about is 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. Jesus wasn’t!

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?

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?

During Ordinary Time, we are exposed to lessons as disciples. The lesson this week includes a warning against spiritual jealousy.

- Has the multiplying of ministries been a cause of jealousy in you? “Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!”

Do you welcome the proclaiming of truth wherever it might be found? If proclaiming the Word of the Lord was a good thing, then how could it be bad if more people were doing it? By dismissing Joshua’s concern, Moses shows that the gift of prophecy belonged to God and not to Moses himself. What God did with the divine gifts was God’s business and not his. And it’s not ours, either.

- What virtues (e.g., openness and flexibility) do you need to grow in order to work better together in ministry and service?

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 talks and visits: “Pray for me. I need it.” AMEN!