

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

Like most people on the road, when it's time for a meal, I start scanning the shop windows for signs of life. On such occasions, an "open" sign floods me with hope that a warm meal and a cold drink are within my grasp. A "closed" placard, on the other hand, dashes my spirits and sets me back to wandering. I realize it's nothing personal, but when I'm really hungry, it can feel mighty personal, even when the sign politely reads, "Sorry, but we're closed." It's still a shut door where I had hoped to be received.

I happened upon a restaurant with an unusual sign. It said, "Sorry, but we're open." Was it an apology for the food? Or for the humility of the service that awaited me? Was it two different signs on top of each other? No matter: The chutzpah of the place amused me, and I had to step inside. Turned out to be a most pleasant experience.

Other signs on the road, which you may have seen on America's Funniest Videos might include the signs with mistakenly-arranged words. Instead of KIDS EAT FREE, the sign says, EAT KIDS FREE. And, of course, there is the classic sign: EAT HERE AND GET GAS!

The spirit of "open" and "closed" is rarely so nuanced in our experience. We're either welcome or not, in or out, one of the "haves" or the "have-nots." In our dealings with others, and even in our relationship with God, we may find ourselves in a free-flowing exchange or apparently speaking to a brick wall. Nothing is going to change, we may sigh. Ill fortune is our lot. Suffering and death are inevitable. A desert will never produce a spring.

And if we think this way, we are in for a surprise.

The prophet has a word for the timid: Be strong! Fear not! God comes to save. And what salvation means is quite concrete: senses restored, ability regained, hope renewed. In God's plan, the lame man dances. And yes, the desert will produce a river. Any way that has been shut, God can open.

Things are hardly as fixed as they may seem from where we sit in the cheap seats of the cosmos. For one who believes, there is no point when it is

time to hang a closed sign on the human experience and say: “No way!” God always has a way.

We see that sign around the bend when our children make choices that disappoint us, when rejection makes us doubt our worth, when injury brings new limitations to a life already bordered by mortality, and most of all when the angel of death first casts its shadow.

We who are used to separating things into tidy categories of good and bad, rich and poor, worthy and unworthy, are ready to default with a quick judgment when we don't get the response from life we were looking for.

Is this new event in our day the signaling that a door has slammed shut or a new one is opening? If we are too quick to interpret and label our experience, we may never know.

Once upon a time Jesus met a man who couldn't hear and therefore could scarcely speak well enough to be understood. After meeting Jesus, the man could hear and spoke plainly. Jesus says, “Don't tell anyone.” But once a mouth has been opened, it's hard to keep it shut. Pretty soon every mouth in the district of the Decapolis was opened and yammering about this event. “He has done all things well,” they say of Jesus. That was a pretty good assessment.

Before that day, the man who had been brought to Jesus had not encountered much hope that things could be different. And suddenly everything was changed for him. All it took was a finger in his ear, a touch of spit, a groan toward heaven, and faith. We may want to add, “A whole *lot* of faith,” but actually that wouldn't be true. Jesus said a mustard seed of faith would be plenty, enough to move a mountain -- which is a whole lot bigger than a tongue and two ears.

Letting God be God is just about the hardest thing a human being can do. We are, historically and regrettably, control freaks -- about the circumstances of our own lives most of all.

The sad thing is, God as much as gave us the power to lock God out of our lives. But what if we looked at the door and saw, instead of a barrier, a way out? Jesus didn't call himself “the Way” for nothing.

Miracles can happen. Peace is possible. Justice is always a decision away. Grace is available for the asking. Jesus is the One Who does all things well, if we can trust the eyewitnesses. Far from being the Lord of the Damned, Jesus is the One Who saves. A way has been opened for us, and all we have to do is walk through the door to get there.

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
- Expressing gratitude

Happy Grandparents Day! AMEN!