

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-5; and Mark 7:31-37

The “like” button and the “follow” button in social media are two of the best marketing ideas since spice racks. One sees at a glance how well received any post has been. “Like” and “follow” provide free endorsements: if someone has thousands or millions of “likes” or followers, we are more inclined to watch or read the post. Furthermore, the buttons generate revenue as people buy ad space and products related to the posting. However, these buttons wreak havoc on the ego. What if no one “likes” my post? How many followers do I need to feel good about myself? I can attest to the effort it takes not to get caught up in this popularity game.

In this week’s gospel, we find Jesus refusing to get caught up in the first century version of this game. After healing a deaf man, Jesus orders folks “not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered it, the more they proclaimed it.” Why isn’t that a good thing? Look at how overblown the crowd’s reaction is: they are superabundantly astonished and say, “He has done all things well.” Isn’t astonishment already superabundant? What are “all things?” They only saw one miracle. Their response is without substance and Jesus knows it. The crowd enjoys the show and the easy fix. They do not register the compassion, suffering and obedience Jesus shows us.

Still, they are there. In a Gentile land, where he owes no one anything, Jesus responds compassionately to the broken man. He takes him away from the spotlight: the man’s impediments are real sources of pain; he is not to be put on display. Jesus groans with the effort of healing, because it costs him. Finally, Jesus invites the man to “be opened.” This is a physical invitation and also a spiritual one. (Remember, Jews saw the person as a whole; body and soul are inseparable.) The healed man now speaks *orthos*, which can be translated *clearly* but also *uprightly*, i.e. with righteousness.

Jesus invites the man to *be opened*; this is a passive verb, something done to us. We do not heal ourselves nor do we make ourselves worthy. In order to receive God’s healing, we must surrender ourselves to God, i.e. we need to align our perspective with God’s. Only when this happens can God open us and act through us. When we insist on saving ourselves, making ourselves worthy of God’s love and eternal life or healing ourselves, we remain debilitated. The deaf man could not hear spiritually nor could he speak with righteousness. Only when he is opened could he hear God’s word and fulfill the primary task of the Christian, speaking the Good News.

In Is 35, the Lord encourages “those whose hearts are frightened.” Fear, even valid fear, closes our hearts. It makes us seek desperately for security. Some grasp for it in “likes,” some in wealth and others in control. When this passage was written, those with military might determined life for everyone else, but God declares that their power is not real or lasting. God “comes with vindication; with divine recompense, God comes to save you.” Then, all that binds us, physically, psychologically and spiritually, disappears. The images of Is 35 – being opened, being cleared, leaping and singing – portray humans fully alive. God is the source of this fullness, not anything in the world. What’s more, when we are healed, the earth is healed because our choices have consequences beyond ourselves.

Making way for God’s healing means letting go of our propensity for pecking orders, such as the ones we make with “like” and “follow” buttons. James 2 talks about a pecking order based on wealth. James asks, when we treat a rich person with dignity and a poor person with contempt, “have [we] not *made distinctions*” – or better – “*been divided* among [ourselves]?” Creating pecking orders harms us. When we prefer the rich, we choose differently than God, who “chose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.” God has given them dignity and we take it away when we idolize the rich and denigrate the poor. Can we instead recognize our common need for God to save us and open us to new potential? What could happen if we no longer sought security in being liked or followed, in wealth or power? What if we let God open us to a future bursting with life?

- ❖ In what areas of your life do you worry about what others will think? How does that worry interfere with your relationship with God?
- ❖ What would letting go of your fears free you up to do?