

Homily - 23rd Sunday of Year B - September 9th 2018

Today, the focus is on the second reading. Whenever I prepare a homily, I try to think of connections and stories to begin with. A connection for today comes from one of the few videos I've saved on my computer. It's a video of a song sung by a person named Susan Boyle from about 9 years ago. During the TV show "*Britain's Got Talent*," this self-admittedly "frumpy" 47-year old woman took the stage before a panel of judges and a live audience.

As she walked to center stage, a rumbling of comments and giggles could be heard from the audience and the judges – who have a reputation for critical (and caustic) remarks about the contestants. Nothing happened to disperse the cynicism in the air during the short interview. When the woman announced that she wanted to be a professional singer like Elaine Page, her words were almost drowned out by cynical laughter. But when Susan Boyle opened her mouth and began to sing "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Miserables*, the audience grew hushed, then flabbergasted, and then they were on their feet – cheering and clapping. They had thought they knew what to expect because they were judging Susan Boyle based on her appearance. When she began to sing, their expectations and their judgments were proven to be completely wrong. Not only could she sing, but she proved herself to be an extraordinarily talented person in a quite ordinary (frumpy) body. She's no longer frumpy.

In today's second reading, the author of James addresses this human penchant for making hasty and faulty judgments of others – based on preconceived notions, and outward appearances. St. James encourages his readers to make their own the mind and heart of God who does not show partiality. Indeed, God chooses the poor and those who others regard as unworthy or incapable "to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom."

Indirectly, the first reading from Isaiah, and the Gospel of Mark make a similar point. Both readings are concerned with the well-being of the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute – whose natural afflictions were worsened by the treatment they received at the hands of their contemporaries. That's because physical, psychological and emotional ailments in those days were attributed in some way to sin (and were regarded as deserved punishments for sin). Religious and members of the community who preferred to remain "ritually clean" avoided people who suffered from these problems. Fortunately, now-a-days most of us don't judge a person as sinful because they contract a disease.

But the words of James continue to demand a hearing when we decide a person's worth: by the color of their skin, their accent, the country they come from; neighborhood in which they live; the car they drive or the clothes they wear. What's your reaction when you see a person dressed all in black – with their hair in spikes, wearing a dog collar, chains and several body tattoos? We might be shocked by their outward appearance, but, when they begin to tell us of their voluntary work for Habitat for Humanity, or their efforts towards preserving the environment, they prove our preconceptions wrong.

And although clothes don't make the man or the woman, even serial killers know that their manner of dress may have some influence on a jury. To that end, they may appear in court clean-shaven, well-dressed and with the hope that their physical respectability will somehow speak more loudly than the truth of their crimes.

Prejudice can also be prompted by age. Older persons who have grown physically feeble are sometimes judged to be "feeble" in other ways as well! We tend to talk louder to them or think that their wrinkles reflect a diminished intellectual capacity. Then they surprise us – with their wisdom and sharp wit.

A friend of mine lately began to address my mother as "sweetie" – which drives me crazy. Young people too with their unique fashion sense and physical demeanor are sometimes misjudged by others who present themselves differently to the world. [So many examples of our penchant to misjudge.]

A priest I know was on the train the other day and someone said to him – “all you guys are just a bunch of losers and abusers.” → Today we call all these kinds of actions profiling. Police detectives do it. Airport screeners do it. And sad to admit, sometimes good Christians do it also - favoritism or partiality.

Of course we have to make judgments. But St James tells us to resist making judgments and ranking people based upon what we can see – just by looking at the exterior. For all we know, the face can be scrubbed clean, but the heart can be completely stained. And conversely, the outer appearance of a person might be dingy – while their inner spirit is pristine.

Because of our tendency to size up others with eyes that are not always illuminated by grace, St. James' challenge (in today's reading) remains relevant. All who hear him today are reminded that faith in our impartial God invites us: to see as God sees; to judge as God judges; and to discover and respect the inherent value and dignity of others, however these God-given qualities may be presented ... or disguised!