

Grass never grew in the Turner family backyard on Woodland Avenue. We tried. We made futile, well-intentioned attempts to throw down grass seed, water it, and watch the sprouts grow. But it never grew thick; it always looked like scratched fur. You see, on any summer's night, the backyard of the Turners became Kauffman Stadium for the neighborhood. Whenever the sun hung low in the sky, when the dads came home and the dishes were done, the kids and parents of our neighborhood all ganged up in our backyard to play whiffleball. Their backyards always looked so nice and green, but we used our yard; we ran, we played, we even dug a big hole out there by the back fence. We didn't have the materials to build anything on top of the ground, but we sure had the shovels to undo the ground that was there.

When school started up in the fall we'd still play a few games in the yard, but homework came first. We also had to read every day, exercise every day, and all us kids took piano lessons. The seasons came and went. Sunday after Sunday we attended church as a family, and every morning--every morning my parents went to daily Mass; they still do.

There were six of us kids. When Dad's mother came to live with us she probably had second thoughts when she met Brutus, my brother's Doberman pinscher. We still remember the day Grandma was writing a letter at the dining room table when Brutus walked up and placed his head on the table next to the stationery. Grandma put down her pen, looked up over the dog's head toward the living room and asked the family sitting there, "How do you spell "vicious"?"

In fifty years of marriage my parents have had the opportunity to refine what they believe in and to share it with us kids and grandchildren. These things mattered to them: education, the church, family, neighborhood, the arts, sports, sacrifice, commitment, humor, and humility. But not possessions, position, sex, drugs, and violence. We were like a lot of other families. We could not afford many possessions; handguns appeared only in Westerns; and sex was something that happened in France. But this is how it was with many couples married after the war. They just didn't have the abundance that's available now. Having less, they could focus on their values, and pass them on to their kids. It's tougher now because so many opinions influence our kids--well, influence us, and we need people who can show us the way.

The miracle in today's gospel is a miracle of influence. Jesus takes a deaf man with a speech impediment and cures him. Often Jesus only works a miracle after receiving some proof of the individual's faith. Not here. Jesus takes the man away in private, opens his ears, loosens his tongue--influences him, and then asks him to keep quiet about it. It's the same miracle that parents work. They take a child who has given no proof of its faith, its trust, or its love; they take that child in private and they teach it to hear, to see, and to speak. Then after working this incredible miracle, if they're like my parents, they say, "Now don't make a big deal out of it." In fact, as I was preparing this talk, my parents asked me not to say anything special about them tonight, but just to give the parish Sunday homily. Sometimes I don't obey my parents. But I know my brothers and sisters want me to say this to our parents and to all the parents here. We recognize the miracle you have worked. You've given us eyes to see the world as you do, ears to hear the wisdom of others, hands to give back to our community, and a heart to receive and to give love. Like the man in today's gospel, it's hard to tell nobody about it.

We never grew grass in our backyard. But we grew community, faith, service, and fun. So to all you parents out there, on behalf of your kids, thanks. And Mom & Dad, on behalf of Margaret, John, Mike, Tom, and Mary, we love you. Congratulations on your 50th anniversary!