

Message for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (9/5/2021)  
Mark 7:24-37

It's the first week of a new school year, and let me start by saying I commend you, teachers, students, and families, for navigating not only the usual back-to-school stressors, but also COVID-related uncertainties. Thank you for your commitment to community-building and learning yet again this year. I'm sure I speak for many others when I say I've got your back!

Alex's first grade teacher welcomed her students back to school by sending a video greeting in advance. And as part of the greeting, she read a picture book, *The Night Before First Grade* by Natasha Wing and Deborah Zemke. As you'd expect, the story touches on some of the issues that might give first graders the jitters, especially social dynamics. The main characters Penny and Jenny are kindergarten besties, but despite their matching outfits, on the first day of first grade they're assigned to different classrooms. Although Penny is a little apprehensive about their separation, she decides to be brave. Over the course of the morning, she makes a new friend, and looks forward to introducing her to Jenny at lunch. And, when they do, in fact, meet in the cafeteria, it turns out that Jenny has also befriended someone new. There's a twist at the end, which I won't spoil for you, but I will say that it's a happy ending.

I'm grateful to Alex's teacher for anticipating the first day of school by telling a story. Stories speak deeply to our lived experience by searching our hearts and giving voice to both our pains and our hopes. Even a simple story has the power to capture the truth like no other message can.

Human beings have always known this. **We're not just *Homo sapiens*, but also *Homo narrans*; storytelling is a defining characteristic of our species.** There are other ways of knowing – through empiricism and reason, for instance – but stories are embedded so deeply in our lives that they form our identity and interpret our experiences, both individually and collectively, even when we may be unaware of their influence. Your life is a story; American history is a story; God's relationship to the world from the beginning is a story.

That last one is of special interest to me as I think about how to proclaim a word of God's goodness to you today. There's a reason we rely so heavily on holy scripture in our congregational life, and particularly on Sunday mornings. **The Bible, at its core, is a sacred story, and not only the story of our ancestors in faith, but our story, too, insofar as "the word of God is living and active," to quote the book of Hebrews,<sup>1</sup> insofar as it lives in us and acts upon us.**

People of faith have often mistaken the purpose and function of scripture, believing it to be a definitive rulebook or literal history or perfect record of truth. But, this is to approach our sacred story with impossible expectations, as biblical scholar Peter Enns puts it,<sup>2</sup> or more specifically, to impose contemporary questions and priorities on the Bible's ancient context. Enns writes, "When we allow the Bible to set its own agenda... trusting God enough to let the Bible be what it is... we open ourselves to God's Word with its challenges and possibilities without a lurking fear of what we

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<sup>1</sup> 4:12.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible Tells Me So*, 22.

might find and going into shock when we find it.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we don’t have to be scandalized by scripture when it doesn’t “behave.”

Today’s Gospel from Mark is a good case study. It’s no secret that the church has long been embarrassed by Jesus’ apparent lapse in goodness. In response to a non-Jewish woman’s plea to liberate her daughter from the grips of a demon, Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Interpreters have bent over backwards to excuse or at least soften Jesus’ insult, but their rationalizations often come across as nervous efforts to distract from the uncomfortable fact that, in this instance, Jesus appears to be caught with his compassion down.<sup>4</sup>

The simpler and more convincing explanation is that his snub is emblematic of the strained relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish people in first-century Palestine. It’s true to their story up to this point. What’s remarkable about this particular episode is the plot twist: “Sir,” the woman replies, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Wincing from a slur, she humbly and brilliantly reframes it for the sake of her child: **“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” that is, even we whom your people consider unworthy, even subhuman – even we are loved and cared for by God.** And, Jesus is persuaded: “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

The Gospel writer of Mark, it seems, is less concerned with preserving Jesus’ perfect image than he is with telling a surprising story of God’s unrestrained grace. And in fact, that’s a decent summary of holy scripture in general: **from enslavement to freedom, from exile to homecoming, from alienation to community, from death to**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Amy C. Howe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 44.

**life – when God has a hand in telling the story, the plot always twists toward redemption.<sup>5</sup>**

**That’s also where the people of God come in. In one sense, all our ministry is an act of cooperation with God to rewrite stories of desolation into stories of hope; disciples of Jesus are called and equipped to facilitate the plot twists God intends for individual life stories, the stories of our communities, and that great story of God’s work to remake the whole world.**

I’m reminded of St. Bede’s Episcopal Church in Santa Fe, the congregation that earlier this year erased all existing medical debt in the state of New Mexico and parts of Arizona. St. Bede’s partnered with an organization called RIP Medical Debt to identify “households whose incomes [were] less than twice the poverty level or [were] insolvent, and [owed] medical debt,” then proceeded to “buy the debt at a fraction of face value (as a collection agency otherwise would) and pay it off.” By raising \$15,000 in donations, St. Bede’s cleared \$1,380,119.87 in medical debt for 782 families.<sup>6</sup> One faithful deed, 782 plot twists.

Friends, where is God at work to twist the plot of your story? Where is God at work to twist the plot of our congregation’s story, our community’s story, the American story, the story of God’s whole creation?

Can we, by paying attention, perceive the new thing that God is doing?<sup>7</sup>

Can we, by God’s grace, be part of it?

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<sup>5</sup> Rick Lawrence, Thriving Congregations “Innovation Day” Retreat, Seatac, WA, 8/28/21.

<sup>6</sup> [www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/santa-fe-church-forgives-entire-state-of-new-mexico-medical-debt/?fbclid=IwAR1yXRL1ch52TitqtMB0PRwwUqY0snjFwvWanjuvGR0NP\\_PhUayzpPdxB\\_y8](http://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/santa-fe-church-forgives-entire-state-of-new-mexico-medical-debt/?fbclid=IwAR1yXRL1ch52TitqtMB0PRwwUqY0snjFwvWanjuvGR0NP_PhUayzpPdxB_y8).

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 43:19.