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Proper 17B; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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The NPR podcast *This American Life* opened its recent episode “Letters! Actual Letters!” with its host, Ira Glass, shadowing Grace, a letter carrier, and we hear about the houses and encounters on her daily mail route. There's a small child who makes drawings for Grace; the dog who always lunges at the door like he's going to break through the glass; there's the dad who organizes the kids' softball league that Grace's daughter is in; and one man suddenly starting getting lots of cards, and it turned out he was recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Grace also has two mailboxes that serve as her private emotional thermometer. When she gets to these mailboxes, they are always full, full of what we might call junk mail, and what our letter carriers are trained to call bulk mail or standard class mail since it pays a lot of their salary. The household takes out what they want and leave what they don't, making it hard for Grace to do her job. Grace tells Ira, “If they don't bother me that much, I know I'm doing well that day. But if I get into a rage about it, I know that something's bothering me. You know what I'm saying? I check back in my life and figure out what's making me so mad.”

We have Jesus getting angry today, too, in a way that also seems disproportionate to the situation at hand. As the Gospel reading we have for this Sunday opens, the disciples are eating, though they have not completed the ritual washing of hands for some reason, we don't know why not. Though thought to be a more remote, smaller town, Bethsaida is also thought to have had a predominantly Jewish population at that time so presumably there would have been a fairly easy way to observe the ritual washing. The Pharisees and scribes, who are all rather far from home if they are from Jerusalem, like the same distance between Newton and Hartford, CT far, which before the transportation revolution was at least 24 hours of continuous traveling over land. Anyhow. These folks ask Jesus why the disciples didn't observe any of the washing traditions. And Jesus completely loses it. He quotes Isaiah, calling them hypocrites. He is very mad, very quickly, and he really lays into these folks— and it's unclear if he's even met these particular Pharisees and scribes, but I'm guessing no— and Jesus gives a laundry list of things that are more important to consider.

We are now back in Mark and will be for the next several months. And, in the chapter Mark leading up to this chapter, the disciples and Jesus have been extremely busy. They have not been on summer break. We are no longer in John 6, which is where we have been the last three Sundays. Nothing of consequence happens for almost 50 verses other than Jesus' overly long diatribe on living bread in John 6. Mark 6, on the other hand, is action-packed. In Mark 6 alone, Jesus is rejected, by his family and the people from his hometown of Nazareth, for the second time. Jesus sends the disciples out two by two on their first mission, and Jesus gave them strict restrictions that made them very dependent on the communities where they went. The disciples reportedly did a good job, which is awesome, and, frankly, off brand. In the meantime, Jesus and the disciples have likely received news that John the baptizer, who baptized Jesus in Mark 1, suffered a gruesome, tragic, senseless death.

Not too surprisingly, after this busy time, Jesus says to his disciples, again, still in Mark 6, hey, let's go away and rest for a bit, so they try to evade the crowds. They get in a boat to go to the other side. Folks figure out where they are going and meet them there as they land. Despite the hungry, tired disciples, who have been rowing a boat, calorically taxing, Jesus has compassion on the crowds, verse 34 says, teaches them, and then they all end up in a situation with an exponential amount of hungry people, which results in what is traditionally the feeding of the masses, which all the Gospels have some version of. This was supposed to be a classic sign of the Messiah. The moment the disciples and Jesus land in Gennesaret, we read: "When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak" (6:53-56).

This is the world Jesus and the disciples are living in right now. Mark keeps reminding us that the word has more than gotten out, because Jesus, and by extension the disciples, literally cannot sit down to eat. This is some first century Princess Diana or Chappel Roan situation in terms of not being able to go out without being swamped. A lot is happening very quickly, and everyone wants a piece of Jesus. They want to be healed, or be taught, or to question him. Mark is crescendoing, gradually increasing— with no sign of stopping.

It doesn't help that everything is laced with emotions, many of which are conflicting, which is taxing. Rejection by family and hometown. Again. Even though Jesus brushes it off, his overreaction makes me think it probably did hurt, as it would most people. Going out to tell people more about God in Christ and it went well. Yay and also doing something new at

work is often very tiring, even when it goes well. I'm sure they are exhausted. And with disciples' success coming on the heels of one of Jesus' failures, I wonder if maybe it was one of those awesome yet difficult things for Jesus, like when someone gets credit for your ideas but they are really important ideas that you know are going to help people, so you want to let it go. We like to think Jesus is above all that, but based on his reaction here, I'm not at all convinced that he is.

If Jesus loses his temper, when his physical and emotional needs are not being met, what about us? It doesn't have to be yelling. It can be snapping at the people we live with, or assuming someone is out to get you when they are lost in their own world thinking about their own problems. As Grace says, "I know I'm not in a good place if I come to this mailbox, and I can't let it just roll off my back." Jesus' emotional outburst, as well as our own, are normally symptoms, a sign that something is going on, and whatever it is needs our attention and needs it bad. It could be something like hunger or sleepiness. We make allowances for children, carrying snacks in our glove compartments or purses in case they start to implode. But sometimes we don't for us as adults. When we go back and see what was happening in chapter 6, it seems to be the first time they've been able to sit down and eat without needing to attend to other people first, so maybe they forewent the washing of the hands. It could also be something complicated like Jesus must have felt when his bumbling disciples did well and he failed with the folks who supposedly knew him best, emotionally complicated like doing a new job, complicated like figuring out how to manage a new diagnosis, complicated like starting school, when you want to see your friends and are also nervous for the year ahead.

The catechesis is in our prayerbook, which like many things in life, sometimes it's really helpful, sometimes it's not, starts out, on page 845, with the question, "What are we by nature?" We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God. What does it mean to be made in the image of God? It means we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God (BCP 845)." Jesus doesn't have all the choices he could have available to him due to his emotional and physical state—maybe sometimes we don't either.

St. Augustine, who is often credited as having written the first autobiography in the Western world, is quoted as saying, "People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering." What if we really pondered our own disproportionate responses, not with shame or guilt, with a posture of getting to know ourselves better as children of God? What if instead of apologizing or trying to smush it down we thought more about why we are so mad or sad?

What if we wondered more about that which might be getting in the way of being able to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God?

Wonder– what is our full mailbox– and why?