

**Pentecost 2B, Proper 5. June 6, 2021. Mark 3:20-35. The Feast of the Parish Picnic.**

My friends, today is the Feast of the Parish Picnic, one of the oldest and most hallowed traditions of the church calendar. And also, of course, a day when you tend to demand a long, scholarly sermon. It is a joy to be able to observe this day this year, after it was impossible last year. And so we're all here together, one body drawn together from across all three of our usual Sunday liturgical expressions. We are here to worship together and to have a party, both of which are deeply Christian activities.

And we have a lot to celebrate. Though we have lost much, and the strife isn't quite over, we have reason to believe that we are at the end of a great ordeal. This year, the fact that we *can* have a party is reason enough to have one. But usually, the parish picnic is a celebration of the program year that we are completing. We thank the choir and Sunday school teachers and the youth leaders and those who led our work in the neighborhood and world. We recognize our graduates and sometimes we make a big show over acknowledging and welcoming some of our newer members. It is a celebration of the last year of our life together, or maybe just an annual celebration of our life together: what Christ has done in us and what we are able to do together. Naturally, we celebrate this with hot dogs and hamburgers and dozens of casseroles/hot dishes/things we call salad that are really just mayonnaise and probably shouldn't be left in the sun so long, and kids creating havoc and gentle battles over the patches of shade with which our lawn is blessed.

It is a great day, in most years and also this year, of gratitude, joy, and hope. And into this happy celebratory day, the gospel of Mark comes with a story of a family torn apart, accusations of demon possession, and Jesus assuring everyone that he is not a threat by comparing himself to a violent housebreaker. If you've been coming the last few weeks, you may find yourself a little disoriented by our sudden leap back into the gospel of Mark. We've been dwelling in the gospel of John for most of the Easter season, wrapped in his fluffy circular prose like a warm blanket. And now we're back in Mark's action movie of a gospel, that doesn't have any time or room for our comfort. I don't want to bore you with too much church nerdiness, but basically the special seasons of Lent and Easter are over and our gospel readings will mostly take us through the gospel of Mark for the rest of the year. So today's reading is more or less just what comes next after the last bit of Mark we read the last time I was wearing green, way back in February.

It's still early in Jesus' public ministry. He has been traveling around the areas near his hometown, teaching, healing the sick, and delivering the possessed. Immediately before this passage, he appoints twelve of his followers to a special role, and then they come home. The crowd gathers, and two different parties converge to try to get Jesus back under control. His family thinks that he has "gone out of his mind," and the Jerusalem religious authorities think he is in league with the devil. It's not exactly picnic material.

But I'm grateful for this unfitting passage this morning, and especially for Jesus' defense against the accusations of the religious authorities. They accuse him of using demonic powers to defeat demons. He points out the absurdity of the accusation. If they're right, then we have great news because if the forces of evil are fighting each other, they are vulnerable. But of course, they are not right. Instead, Jesus gives a better description of his work, using this startling image of Satan as a strong homeowner, and Jesus breaking into the home, tying up the devil, and then plundering his house.

Again, it isn't what we would have picked for the parish picnic. But I'm glad it's here. Because on a day that could be just happy-clappy, it reminds us that the life together that we are

celebrating, the work Christ is doing in us together, is anything but banal. The common life God calls us into is transgressive and perhaps a little dangerous. It puts us at odds with powerful people who may try to restrain us. It sends us into enemy territory on plundering missions. Of course, we don't usually do this by breaking into houses, tying people up, and taking their stuff. But this startling image, I hope, helps us see how peculiar our common life is. In a world that teaches us to accumulate as much as we can, that judges worth by production, that runs on esteem and pride, we give and share as much as we can, count worth by the love of God, and live by forgiveness. The parish picnic isn't an unnecessary flourish to this kind of life. To live this kind of life, we have to celebrate it together, because it's just too blessed peculiar to sustain alone. We live it together, by the grace of God and for the good of God's world. And it is something to celebrate. Amen.