Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



by Pat Marrin

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June 26, 2023

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“Enter through the narrow gate” (Matt 7:12).

Gn 13:2, 5-18; Mt 7:6, 12-14

Jesus no doubt was using a common saying when he told his disciples not to cast pearls before swine or that which is is holy to dogs. The contrast could not be greater: Pearls were precious, as in the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, while swine were considered unclean animals, avoided by Jews. Dogs ran in packs, ate virtually anything and were dangerous when hungry.

The disciples were entrusted with the precious Word of God, sent out to share news of the kingdom, so Jesus' instructions instilled reverence. No trash talk, no rough language was to interfere with their charge as preachers. Their first words were to be "Peace be with you," and when people listened, the disciples were to repeat Jesus's own words of comfort and healing.

We spend most of our days talking and have opportunities to take conversation in many directions. Words can uplift or tear down. We can encourage and inspire or criticize and belittle. Humor can lighten the spirit or weigh it down with negativity and mean-spirited jokes at "them" in defense of "us."

On the power of language, Jesus says in Matt 12:36, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." It is a high standard, but consider how it could change us immediately and radically if we took it seriously. This is the "narrow gate" we must pass through. It is just wide enough to admit our true selves, without guile or equivocation. Come as God made you, simple and real, and your very being will proclaim the Gospel, nothing more and nothing less.

Pencil Postscript

I am writing to NCR readers of Pencil Preaching to announce my retirement. Age, energy, and freedom to focus on the "Francis" comic strip (which will continue) are all factors. I welcome this transition after 25 years with NCR, and I ask you to continue to support the paper for news and analysis you can only get here. My last column will be this Friday, June 30. I am open to future writing opportunities with NCR, but nothing specific is planned for now.

Special thanks to my editor, Heidi Schlumpf, to retired editor Tom Roberts, to Shannon Evans and former Celebration columnist Fr. Lawrence Mick, who has monitored the column and made valuable suggestions since the death of my wife, Diane Marrin, in 2021. These friends and colleagues have all helped edit Pencil

Preaching for publication. I add Sr. Mary McGlone, CSJ, whose Sunday Scripture columns remind us that the Word of God is the source of our Catholic identity and the heart of our faith. The joy of writing the column has been enhanced by reader emails and support. For this I am deeply grateful.