What do you think of when you hear the phrase: states rights? Some people have argued that ‘states rights’ simply means that most decisions get made by state governments. Some people argued each state should get to decide the rules for voting, that each state should get to decide what constitutes fairness in schools, in housing and in commerce, that each state should get to decide who is eligible for the privileges and responsibilities of marriage.

When I hear the phrase, states rights, I think of a much more complicated story, a story that has hurt millions of people. For me, the phrase states rights is part of a story that winds backwards into the nation’s history of slavery and the oppression of women and native peoples. For me states rights is a story, a story of the long history of powerful white men using the laws of their states and localities to oppress instead of to protect the rights of the people. For me the story of ‘states rights’ is an evil story, but the story was the dominant story in some of our states for more than 100 years.

A few words can point to a very long story. This was the case for Ezekiel’s people. Ezekiel’s people repeated this proverb to each other: The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. In Hebrew the proverb is just six words. The proverb expresses the ancient idea that people are punished for actions taken by their parents.

Ezekiel lived 600 years before Jesus. Ezekiel’s words come from the time when the city of Jerusalem and the Temple built by Solomon were destroyed by the Babylonian army. During the destruction of the city and the temple the people repeated the proverb: The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.

Ezekiel was outraged that people were shifting the blame to their parents, but there is something deeper going on here. During the centuries between the construction of Temple by King Solomon and the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonian army there was one dominant story about the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The important parts this story were the Temple in Jerusalem, the rule of the descendants of King David and the leadership of the priests. In this story good behavior and bad behavior were communal. Blessings and punishment were assigned to whole generations of people and sometimes to multiple generations.

When the people said: The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge they were doing two things. First, they were saying that the destruction of the city and the Temple were not their responsibility. They were laying the blame on their parents and grandparents. Second, they were telling once again the old, old story that the nation of Israel needs to do only three things: support the kings, regardless of their behavior, focus all of their faith practices in the Temple in Jerusalem, and rely on the ancient families of priests as their religious leaders.

By the time Ezekiel delivered these words to the people most of the old story had already fallen apart. The kings had been captured by the Babylonian army. Stories about the importance of the king no longer make any sense when you don’t have a king. The Temple
had been destroyed. Stories about the importance of the Temple no longer make any sense when you don’t have a Temple. The priests had been led into exile in Babylon. Stories about the importance of the historic family of priests no longer make any sense when all of the priests have been taken away.

Ezekiel tried to tell his people, ‘this story is old and worn out and broken.’ Ezekiel tried to tell his people, ‘you know this story is false because it does not match up with the facts on the ground, it does not match up with the reality we are seeing with our own eyes.’ Ezekiel tried to tell his people that this story had led to the destruction of the nation of Israel.

Ezekiel is trying to get his people to learn and live a new story. It is a story of individual responsibility. It is a story of an active relationship between God and the people. It is a story where each person takes responsibility for their prayers, for their spiritual life, and for their actions.

What is the story you are telling in your life? What is the story you are telling with your words? What is the story you are telling with your actions?

In the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus ask a question. “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ The first son answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went and worked in the vineyard. The father went to the second son and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ The second son answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”

Consider the story you are telling with your life. Consider the story you are telling with your words. Even more, consider the story you are telling with your actions.

It is a strange thing about people who read the stories of Jesus today. It is a strange thing, because there is a very large group of people who first and foremost identify themselves as Christians who have many, many words to say about Jesus. And then there are many others who are followers of Jesus who mostly seem to understand Jesus point, so they do not spend a lot of energy making a lot of speeches about Jesus. Instead they have many actions that reveal that they have understood Jesus’ message.

What is the story we are telling with our lives? Our story is not expressed in tired old phrases that make excuses for a history of injustice and oppression. Our story is a story that reflects the reality of life. Our story is a story of actions that speak more powerfully than words. Our story is a story of love. Our story is a story of God’s new creation.