



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 9, 2018
ISAIAH 35:4-7; PSALM 146; JAMES 2:1-10, 14-17; MARK 7:24-37

WHO'S SITTING IN MY PEW?!

Mark 7: 24-37 [*Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."]*

I had been a priest for about a year when a long-time parishioner in my first church came to me in the narthex just before the service was to begin. She had a distressed look on her face, and said: "Steve, someone is sitting in my pew."

I peered through the door into the church to see a young family of four, unfamiliar to me, sitting in the fourth pew from the front on the left side. This was indeed where Peggy always sat.

"Who are they," she asked. "Looks like a family visiting, isn't that grand," I replied.

“Well, will you go ask them to move so I can sit down?” She was serious.

It was a teaching moment...

I want to juxtapose that story to one contained in the new book about the Early History of Saint Mark's, founded in Seattle nearly 130 years ago. I am thrilled that this work has been published, and it will be available soon in the Cathedral Shop.

Among the rich stories author Alan Davidson documents of the early days of this parish in one that traces the origins of the Rubric—our periodical magazine, the latest issue of which you may have received in your mailbox this week.

The first edition was published in December 1890 about a year after the church was formed. Included in that inaugural volume was a column by the rector, The Reverend David Claiborne Garrett, who wrote:

“Strangers can come into St. Mark's and march boldly to any vacant place without the dread of being frowned upon by some pew worshipper. Ours is a free church not in name only...Then, too, the mixing up of all the different families of the parish may emphasize a fact too much forgotten, that the congregation itself is a family... This is the spirit that will prevail in St. Mark's.”¹

Garrett's statement seeded the legacy we enjoy today, when we say to all present: Wherever you are on your spiritual journey,

you are welcome here, you are welcome at God's table.

Today launches the fall season of programs and ministries here at Saint Mark's, and we highlight our sense of family life in the Ministry Fair to be held today in Bloedel Hall. I hope you will drop in.

Traditionally, this day has been known as Homecoming Sunday, because it marked the return of many who spent their Sundays in summer in other recreational endeavors.

The notion of homecoming hearkens back to Garrett's proposition that we are, first and foremost, family. It also echoes the passage from James' letter today where all people are claimed as God's beloved children, and as followers of Christ, we would do well to model our treatment of others on such a premise.

Which makes the pairing of James' letter with this passage from Mark's gospel so ironic. The crafters of our lectionary who connected these two scraps of scripture surely knew that Jesus' engagement with the Syrophoenician woman would require some unpacking, because at first glance, he is just astoundingly disrespectful to her. It galls us to think that he is capable of saying such offensive things to another human being. Jesus fails to do exactly what James directs. And there's the rub for us to ponder.

For my part, I think Jesus learned something from this woman in their encounter—he

changed—he learned something about himself and about his ministry that has bearing in his life and in ours. Their encounter invites us to consider how we engage strangers along the way, too.

This is fairly early on in Jesus' ministry, and he has traveled beyond the bounds of familiarity and into the borderlands where strangers linger, and this woman presents to him as a triple outsider—a Canaanite, unclean by religious precepts of purity, a marginalized woman who is likely unmarried since no man presented to plea her case, and the parent of one whose illness is interpreted as demon-possession. From our perch, we can see her tenuous circumstances.

From her liminal state of vulnerable desperation she crosses the cultural boundaries designed to separate her from him and pleads for this holy man to heal her daughter. To this point, Jesus seems to think his role as rabbi, healer, even messiah is for the benefit of Israel only. It is a narrow interpretation of family, reasonable enough at face value, but not if he considers that real hope cannot be doled out as favoritism in God's economy. The good news of God's love has no bounds.

She persists, remarkably, despite his contempt for her, and finally he is broken open by her faithful push-back, by her compassion for the little girl, and invites him into a compassionate conversation, which

unfolds into the healing experience for daughter, for mother, and for Jesus, too.

This brief story is found in both Mark's and Matthew's gospels, which means from the earliest moments of Christian development, the trajectory of messianic hope borne in Jesus held an expansive place that would include Gentiles. You and I gather here this morning as the progeny of such a hope; we are inheritors of a legacy that says no one is unwelcome here, because no one is unclaimed by God in whose name we gather.

And, if all this is not enough, the lectionary tethers a second healing story to the first for our consideration—this one involving the healing of a deaf and mute man, to whom Jesus says Ephaphtha, Be opened... The words light on our ears even today, inviting us to be opened to this gospel of expansive hope (Ephaphtha), inviting us to speak the truth of this good news as open to all (Ephaphtha), inviting us to experience a change of heart simply because someone persisted enough that we opened to new ways of being in the world. Be opened. (Ephaphtha).

I think it was Valclav Havel who said in times like these when everything seems to be changing, it is important to remember that anything is possible. Terrible things and wonderful things. You have a role in plotting the course.

Which is why we gather here, as family, as community of faith, so that we might plot the course together, in God's name.

Which is why we lay claim to scores of Saint Mark's ministries today, and celebrate them with special intention, so that we might know that all that we are, and all that we do, is framed by the good news that God's love knows no bounds, and neither should ours.

When everything is changing, anything is possible. What could the world become if it

spent less time complaining about who's in my pew and listened more to the wisdom of outsiders whose persistent cry is one of hope and longing for a different way.

And can we speak boldly into the breach between what is and what could be, and say to our broken, hurting world—Ephaphtha, be opened.

ⁱ Davidson, Alan. The History of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral: St. Mark's Parish, 1189-1897. Published by Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, 2018. Pg. 63



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