

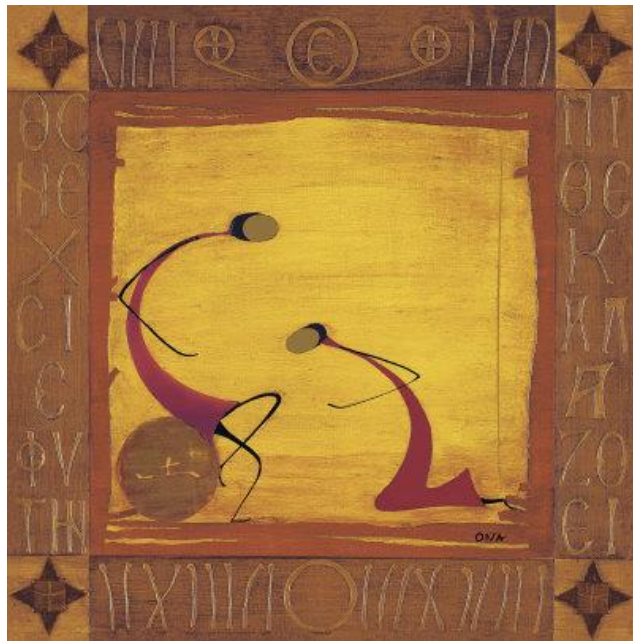


# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 8, 2024  
ISAIAH 35: 4-7; PSALM 146; JAMES 2:1-10, 14-17; MARK 7:24-37

## HOMECOMINGS



Happy Homecoming Sunday...

In my childhood, it was customary for my family to make our way three times each year to my great-grandparents' farm, the homestead in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas, about an hour northwest of Little Rock. Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, and Decoration Day, a southern tradition in late May when we

converged on the farm for lunch before moving to the nearby cemetery for a service of remembering those who had gone before. The graves of loved ones were cleaned up, tended with care, and fresh flowers placed beneath the headstones—Decoration Day.

These were homecomings, each in their own way, pilgrimages really, with 30 or 40

relatives gathering at the homestead for the stated purpose—giving thanks, exchanging presents, remembering our forebears. Rituals that gave a contour of meaning to life.

The meal was central to each gathering, always a potluck, and near-miraculous with its soporific abundance. There were memorable standouts as perennial favorites—my great-great grandmother’s banana pudding, my great-grandmother’s turkey dressing, my great aunt’s dirty rice.

The farmhouse was a simple four-room square abode, with a narrow kitchen and drawing well appended on one end, and a north-facing shade porch on the other end, where one could find always find a restorative breeze on a hot day. That shade porch was where the kids were sent to eat their meal, leaving the dining table and living room seating for the adults.

We didn’t stay long on the porch though, racing off to resurrect our play in the farmyard—king of the mountain atop the storm cellar, chasing chickens, daring one another to touch the electric fence, or jumping out of the barn’s hayloft.

When Kathy first joined me in high school, such games were long since set aside, and we’d join the adults, helping prep the meal, put more wood on the fire, watch the older folks play card games.

At some point, we invited Kathy’s mother to join us, although I wasn’t sure how that would go. My great uncle was a WWII veteran with PTSD from his time in the South Pacific, so the prospect of bringing a Japanese woman who spoke broken English into this setting was not without risk. It turns out everyone was so gracious, especially my uncle’s wife, who I suspect intervened on any impulse to show any racist indignation.

My great aunt died last year on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and while she had her foibles as we all do, hers was a remarkable faith. She was the mix of meek humility and fierce hope—attributes I can see in the Syrophoenician woman in today’s gospel. Remarkable faith, humility, yet fiercely hopeful for Jesus to act, not on her behalf, but for her child.

We can’t really explain away Jesus’ derogatory rudeness to her, his biting response that essentially amounts to racist

indignation and a tinge of misogyny. He was a Jew; she a Canaanite, and a woman. It is there. It was wrong, and yet he has his heart turned by this woman's courageous faith that presses him to consider that his calling to heal is not just narrowly defined but is to be broadly understood—that if he is representing God, then no one is beyond the pale of that healing love.

It is such an uncomfortable passage and yet so key to understanding the gospel we have received. It peels back whatever glosses of superhuman perfection we may choose to apply to the historical Jesus, and we see his full humanity here, even while holding fast to his divine powers to heal and make whole. It is a *both-and moment* that transcends our binary impulses. Jesus opens to a new thing, and we are the beneficiaries even today. So, thank you, Syrophenician woman, whose name we do not know. You are our forebear in faith, and you inspire us even now.

It seems oddly fitting that we would get this gospel reading on this Sunday, when we gather in this spiritual homestead to ritually mark our common life in this cathedral community. It is Homecoming Sunday, a time set apart to celebrate and

rejoice in all the ministries that abound here and bless all those who exercise their faith in ministry for the benefit of others. The invitation to us all is to give thanks, share gifts of time and talent with one another and the world, and to be mindful of those on whose shoulders we stand today, most of whose names we will never know.

Twelve years ago, on this Sunday, I started saying a liturgical greeting during worship that I learned back in those hills of Arkansas. *Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here, you are welcome at God's table.* The saying stuck, and it has become an integral aspect of our life here. *Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here, you are welcome at God's table.* Which is to say, you are family, and we see you; we are glad you are here, and you are welcome at this meal. Because nothing is more sacred than sharing a meal together.

These are the rituals that give a contour of meaning to life.

Happy Homecoming Sunday.

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<sup>i</sup> Le Pardon, by Thierry Ona, accessed at <https://jabbokdawn.com/2012/09/08/the-syrophenician-woman/>, 9/4/2024.

**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 Syrophenician 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."*]



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