



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • [www.standrewsaa.org](http://www.standrewsaa.org)

## Sermon for Sunday, September 9, 2018

*Proper 18*

Isaiah 35:4-7a | Psalm 146 | James 2:1-17 | Mark 7:24-37

FR. CHARLES WITKE

We come to the beginning of a new year of activity in our in church and school. Vacations for those who took them are at an end, and some of us can look back on time spent away, doing what we do on down time. Sometimes in such get-away moments, we learn something unexpected.

Such is what happens in our Gospel from Mark this morning. Jesus too sometimes took vacations, it would seem, and has gone off to the region of Tyre, outside Palestine and the crowds that followed him. But like other tries at going apart and not wanting anyone to know where they are, for him this one fails, and fails in a rather spectacular way with the encounter between Jesus and a woman. She is not a Jew, but a pagan, a Greek, specifically a Syro-Phoenician woman. She comes asking for help for her demon-possessed daughter. And she interrupts a group of men seeking to be apart.

In terms of Near Eastern social behavior in Jesus' day and even to our own times, what she does is an affront to the honor of Jesus. The patriarchal system of the ancient and modern Near East prohibits women from assertiveness in public life; women then and now in that part of our world suffer from a lack of what we would call rights. No woman, especially a gentile, a pagan, unknown and unrelated to a Jew, would dare to invade his privacy at home to seek a favor. A rebuff was to be expected, understandable, even required, upon the part of a Jewish male so treated. And so Jesus defends the collective honor of the Jews and says to her after her request for healing of her daughter, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Now, dogs in the Near East, ancient and modern, have a very bad time of it. To call someone a dog is a very strong insult, and dogs are treated with hostility and contempt and not traditionally kept as pets. So for Jesus to imply that the foreign woman standing before him with her desperate request for her daughter's healing is a dog is a fairly standard insult, though one which we hardly expect from Jesus himself. Is Jesus only reflecting the hostility endemic between Jews and their alien neighbors, a hostility we see played out in our own day? He cannot be testing her faith, as older commentators vainly trying to rescue Jesus thought, for when he dismisses her he says, "For that saying you may go—the demon has left your daughter." Nothing here about her faith making it happen. Something else is going on here.

The woman does something even worse than accost Jesus: she talks back and argues the point, and secures Jesus' intervention. By acceding to her request, Jesus might be seen by us today as doing something unremarkable; after all, it is his calling to heal people. But a great deal of what Jesus does in the Gospels is in fact attacks on traditional and expected social behavior, and challenges to the system that maintains these cultural sensibilities. The original audience of Mark and the other Gospel writers could see this behavior as a kind of subversion. Here he not only consents to talk with this intruder but actually concedes a debate to this woman. He even gives in to her request when those with him expect he would get rid of her.

He does things like this a lot. Other times he eats with the wrong people, overturns religious taboos by touching a leper, breaking rules and expectations in most all of his social interactions, upsetting the established sense of social order and propriety. They are to be seen as symbolic actions, the symbolic construction of the new social order of the kingdom of God: the poor, the fallen, the alien, women, those rejected and estranged from society by ethnicity or religion or deafness or blindness or illness or mental oppression, are restored to wholeness and to relationship to society.

Consistently he challenges the system that maintains these cultural sensibilities to demean and reject others unlike themselves. The original audience of Jesus and of Mark and the other Gospel writers could see this behavior as a kind of desirable subversion. This time he not only consents to talk with this intruder but actually concedes a debate to this woman. He even gives into her request.

Maybe we can learn something from these actions of Jesus. Maybe when we look down upon and reject those different from ourselves in their brokenness, poverty, or ethnicity and religion, we are not true followers of him. Maybe Jesus learned from his experience with the Syro-Phoenician woman, and wants us to learn too. Maybe it's not an accident that his next action is overcoming the deafness and speech impediment of another pagan foreigner; one who gets who Jesus is before many of his own followers do, and whom Jesus now immediately meets in his need. For Jesus has learned something from the woman in today's Gospel. We need to as well. If we are called to be his people in our own time and place, and to continue his work, once more we have today a clear program to follow. Amen.