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“The Issues that Divide Us: LGBTQ+ Community”  
Covenant Presbyterian Church  
February 9th, 2020

Mark 7:24-30

**24** From there he [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, **25** but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. **26** Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27** 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.” **28** But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” **29** Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” **30** So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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When I was 19, I came out to my mom as a lesbian. I was in college here at UW, but home visiting for Thanksgiving break. I had recently put language to an identity and sense of self that I had felt and known for a long time, and had recently started dating a woman who mattered a great deal to me. Plus, I wanted to invite this woman, my new girlfriend, home to my big family Christmas that was coming up. I come from a family of working class Democrats, a family of strong-willed women, a family who loves me, and are open-minded, and kind, and so I trusted that this news would be revealing, but not entirely risky. I was going to come out, and I was going to bring someone to Christmas.

My mom and I were sitting side by side on the couch watching tv in the evening after dinner, both facing forward. For anyone who has ever had to tell someone something important, or difficult, it seems we often find ourselves in front of the tv, or in the car, or somewhere where you’re both looking forward, focused on something else so you’re near each other but not looking at each other. So we’re sitting side by side and a commercial

comes on tv, and so I thought, here's my opening, my moment to be brave: "Mom, I think I'm gay." And then, in her triumphant moment to win Mom of the Year, she says, "Well, everyone's got problems."

Now I love my mom, but she really missed the mark. I burst into tears, saying, "Well mom it's not a problem I just wanted to tell you and I shouldn't have said anything and nothing matters and let's just never talk about this again..." and on and on with this sadness that the big moment did not go well. "Everyone's got problems" is true, generally, but it wasn't the "Okay, I love you, let me know how I can support you" message I'd hoped for. Mom did not get it right, right away. [She approved of me telling this story, though].

And I learned much later that the following week, after some apologies and longer conversations and after I'd gone back to Madison for the rest of the semester, my mom sent an email to our entire extended family. In the email it explained that I was a lesbian, that I had a girlfriend, and that I would be bringing my girlfriend to Christmas and that "if anyone had anything negative or hurtful to say that they better pull it together." That "Chelsea is loved and accepted and cherished no matter what." And Christmas went great. Sometimes we don't get it right, right away. But thanks be to God not all is lost.

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We're nearing the end of our sermon series on "The Issues that Divide Us," where over the last month we've taken up deep and thoughtful considerations of abortion, race, gun violence, immigration, and today, our last "big issue" of the series: The LGBTQ+ community. For those who are unfamiliar or need a refresher, "LGBTQ+" refers to the population and community of people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or, as the plus sign signifies, an additional and ever-expanding

spectrum of gendered and sexual identities that deviate or expand from the standard our current culture has designated. That “standard,” of course, being heterosexual, and cisgender.

Some of this can feel confusing, especially if you’re not regularly encountering this language or if for you, being cisgender or heterosexual is the only thing you’ve ever known. For others, this may feel very much within your comfort zone. And either way, wherever you are on the spectrum of gender or sexuality or the spectrum of knowing what to say or not say about gender or sexuality, know that you are welcome here.

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Because the “issue” of the LGBTQ+ community is expansive. It raises questions like: What is gender? What is sexuality? Who has access to adequate and affirming health care and legal rights? Who gets to feel at ease walking down the street holding their partner's hand? Who gets to use the bathroom? Who can be married? Who can be ordained? Who can be the president? How do we welcome the outsider? How do we remember that those we deem “outsider” might be the folks we’ve been sitting next to all along?

This population--they are, *I am*--indeed, an issue that divides this country, divides families, and divides churches.

Of course, within the Presbyterian Church (USA) there have been statements and strides in the direction of LGBTQ+ inclusion and justice. The PC(USA)’s formal statements on the topic includes full affirmation and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community on issues of identity, welcome, church membership, leadership, ordination, and marriage.<sup>1</sup> And, these affirmations have been hard-fought, and like any divisive issue, never too smooth.

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<sup>1</sup><https://covnetpres.org/2018/06/a-new-day-for-lgbtqia-people-in-the-church-general-assembly-unanimously-approves-overtures/>. See also <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-presbyterian-church-usa>

Because, like each topic we've taken up in this series, there is a long and deep history of harm, hate, and hurt that is far from resolved.

Still now, people continue to work tirelessly in their communities for justice and are met with judgement; kiddos look for good care and are met with criticism; we attempt over and over to expand our perceptions but we stumble over the policies, or the pronouns. Folks who are LGBTQ+ fail to acknowledge the ways we are complicit in systems of racism, sexism, and classism that further divide us from our own community. We sometimes fail to step in or speak up. Or when we do step in, speak up, we miss the mark. We say the wrong thing or make assumptions about what someone needs. So often churches are making the assumption that the LGBTQ+ community is some ethereal population out there, awaiting our warm embrace. Forgetting that so often we've been here all along; every institution in this country, including the church, stands on the shoulders of closeted *and* out LGBTQ+ folks.

Sometimes we don't get it right, right away. But thanks be to God not all is lost.

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We might not get it right, right away. And we might be in good company. *Really* good company, in fact.

Our scripture today has nothing to do with sexuality or policy or pronouns. It has everything to do with persistence. And broadened perspectives. And everything to do with the truth being taught by people we least expect.

We enter the story where Jesus has departed away from the crowds of people seeking his healing to a place called Tyre. In this historical context, Tyre is a region regularly in political conflict with the Israelites. Second, this is a region of Gentiles, not Jews. And so

as scripture tells us, when Jesus entered the house but couldn't escape notice, and a woman came to him, begging him for care for her daughter, it is important to note that she is not only a woman, but a Gentile woman from a region in political conflict with the Israelites. Her gender, race, her politics, and even the status of illness in her family, suggest "other, outsider." So far, this does not sound atypical from our usual gospel stories--where Jesus encounters someone along the way that is an outsider, and has a real, desperate need. But what happens next flies in the face of the Jesus we know and love: She needs something important. He says no.

This point should give us pause. He says no. Actually, he says more than no; he insults her.

Our scripture says: **26b:** She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27** 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." Basically, "my healing will go to the Jews first, the Israelites first, those in my circles first, then you get your healing and your blessing." He calls this woman a dog. He tells her to wait in line.

This should give us pause. It is an incredibly strange story to be preserved in our sacred text. It is an off-putting portrayal of Jesus, now *and* in historical context. And right before this section of the gospel of Mark, Jesus has just finished explaining to his disciples that their obsession with purity laws and division abandons the true commandment of God.<sup>2</sup> So what is happening here when Jesus says no to this woman? Is he testing her? Is he testing his disciples to see if they've been listening all along--cause notice they've gone silent. Is he just in a bad mood? Or did we just catch him complicit in the same cultural norms of sexism and racism, insiders/outsideers he so often combats? Whatever the reason, and even if this is a sort of test (which some scholars have argued it is)--where Jesus is "playing the fool" so someone else can proclaim the good news--we've got a

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<sup>2</sup> See Mark 7:1-23.

story here where Jesus says something offensive, even hurtful. A story we maybe wish didn't get preserved.

But then she answers him. She refuses to back down or sink back into the crowd, rebuffed. She tells him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She takes his insult and doubles down--she breaks the norms of her society that tell her to retreat and be quiet; she risks everything, and challenges: "Sir, are you sure?" "Jesus, do you remember who you are, cause I sure do."

And then, like a miracle itself, Jesus changes his mind, he adjusts his perception. He heals her daughter; she wrestled for her blessing and got it. He changes his tune and expands his perspective even though he didn't get it right, right away; This desperate mother, "was warned, [...] given an explanation, and nevertheless she persisted."<sup>3</sup> She helped him get his story straightened out of who's in and who's out by reminding him that nobody's out.

Does our christology, our concept of Jesus as Christ, make enough room for him to also be Jesus as human? Can we, even for a few minutes without getting our feathers too ruffled, entertain the idea that Jesus Christ himself may have stumbled over his wording and then maybe even changed his mind about something? Or at the very least, can we entertain the possibility that Jesus may not have been the only person doling out blessings or preaching the good news that day? This woman's persistence, her faithfulness to the Jesus she had heard about, her wit, her risk, proclaims the good news for all people. Her challenge, her assurance, her proclamation opens the possibility of his. Her daughter gets healed, and maybe Jesus gets a little healed too.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Nevertheless, she persisted' becomes new battle cry after McConnell silences Elizabeth Warren  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/08/nevertheless-she-persisted-becomes-new-battle-cry-after-mcconnell-silences-elizabeth-warren/>

We don't always get it right, right away. And we're in very good company.

Jesus didn't quite get it right when this woman asked him for something important--asked to be taken seriously and for healing for her daughter.

And if Jesus is challenged in order to challenge, healed in order to heal, then maybe that also tells us something about our own capacities to do the same.

And if this woman can get what she needs for her vulnerable child, to unabashedly speak up for what is right, and just, and kind, then maybe that also tells us about our own capacities to do the same.

If this story tells us anything, it's that we can never underestimate the power of a parent trying to do right by her kiddo.

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There was a news story out of Mississippi that circulated about a year ago of a mother whose son had just come out to her as gay. She didn't know what to say, and she didn't know who she could talk to about it, so she made a phone call to an area gay bar to ask the bartender. The mother asked, "Hi, uh, are you gay?" Bartender: "Yes." She then explained to him, "My son just came out to me, and I'm wondering what to say--what you might have wanted to hear from your mom?" The bartender's response? "Tell him you accept him. Tell him you love him."<sup>4</sup>

You want a glimpse into the kingdom of God? It's not in perfection, but in the persistent efforts to do right by those we love. We change our minds and our attitudes and our vocabulary when things get personal. In coming into the world and putting on a body and a beating heart (and sometimes a bad attitude) God got personal. When your grandchild starts to use they/them pronouns or your child comes out as gay or bi or trans it gets personal. When you see or hear of discrimination or hate speech in your neighborhood it

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-5341305/Mother-calls-gay-bar-advice-son-comes-out.html>

gets personal. When your colleague or friend loses a loved one because suicide attempts are exponentially higher if you are LGBTQ+, the stats you read about hit home. The political is personal.<sup>5</sup> And if it isn't, maybe it ought to be. The mother who called the gay bar didn't know how to get it right but she called a bartender and made a connection and she tried. She learned that to say "I accept you. I love you," is a balm and a blessing that never gets old. Or, in my own mother's case, "Chelsea and her girlfriend are coming to Christmas." Or the Syrophonecian woman reminding Jesus Christ himself, and all of us, that the abounding love of God and the radical, unabashed care for the most vulnerable covers all borders, all barriers, all bad attitudes, all binaries, all bodies.

We, too, are called to listen for that good news.

Lastly, it might just be that those Syrophoenician women, and protective mothers, and gay bartenders, and gay, bi, trans kids--the folks who make church church and have been here all along--the ones proclaiming the good news, are always nearer than we imagine, and never who we expect. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> History of the phrase "the personal is political" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_personal\\_is\\_political](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_personal_is_political)