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Christianity 101
Mark 7:24-30, James 2:14-17

⁴ From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre.^[a] 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,^[b] 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.

Confirmation class begins tonight for 7 of our youth, and we'll be talking about the basics of Christian faith, what it means to be a Christian.

It's kind of like a **Christianity 101 class**.

Which got me thinking—if someone asked you, what are the **basic ideas** of Christian faith, **what would you say?**

Love God? Love neighbor as yourself?

And how do you know someone is a Christian? Because we are not supposed to judge others, what do you **want people to see in YOUR life**, so others know that you are a Christian?

Patience? Kindness? Compassion? Mercy? Humility? Justice?

Today we hear from James that our **faith should be matched** with our actions, our works.

It's not enough to say we **believe** in a loving God, we have to **act out God's love**.

Listen to James again:

⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters,^[e] if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?* ¹⁷ *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

In other words if we **believe** everyone is a child of God,

Do we act like it?

Do we serve, and help, and reach out, whenever there is a need?

How do we act like Christians, putting our faith into works?

What are the ***top 10 things*** that would show your faith?

What about this as a top 10 list?

1. Love God with your whole heart
2. Love your neighbor as yourself
3. Treat everyone as a child of God
4. Care more about a good name than great riches
5. Care for the poor—don't take advantage of them
6. Work for fairness and justice for all
7. Be generous
8. Be kind and compassionate
9. Help people who are suffering
10. Try to do and say what Jesus would do and say!

(based on Jill Duffield's 'Christianity 101' in the Presbyterian Outlook, Looking into the Lectionary, September 3, 2018).

These may be basics of Christian faith,

but they sure aren't easy!

It's a ***challenge*** to be a Christian!

It's a challenge to do any of this.

It takes ***time, energy, and effort***—just like anything else important and meaningful in our lives.

As Presbyterians, we often ***emphasize our intellect***,
what we believe in our heads.

And it is important to know what we believe.

Very important.

But James reminds us that we ***can't just believe*** something—
 it has to ***translate into action***, into good works.
 He does not say that those good works earn our way to heaven,
 but that our actions show our faith.
 Faith without works is, dead.
 It's worthless.
 We need ***faith AND works***.
Belief AND action.

So, what does that mean ***in your life?***
 How ***do you match*** what you believe with what you do?

The ***mentors*** who will meet with our youth are putting their faith into action,
 by spending quality time with the youth.

The ***volunteers*** who are helping at the Youth Café
 are putting their faith in action,
 by caring for all the different youth with hospitality, welcome, and food.

Most of you in this church put your faith into action everyday—
 think about the times that you have been ***challenged to live your faith***—
 how did you meet that challenge?

Do you think that ***Jesus ever found it challenging*** to put his faith into action?

Some might say that our story in Mark 7 about the Syrophenician woman's
 daughter shows ***Jesus was challenged*** to put his faith into practice.

In fact, when I read the story I thought,
 at first I'd have to give Jesus ***an "F" in Christianity***.
 He seems to flunk Christianity 101.
 He looks at a desperate Gentile mother and ***calls her a dog!***—
 a slanderous term that Jews of his time often used to refer to non-Jews, or
 Gentiles.
 It's not a nice word here.
 And Jesus says it.

This is ***NOT the Jesus that most of us know and love***.

I want you to do something right now—***close your eyes and picture Jesus.***

What does he look like? (take answers)

Does he look calm?

Is he wearing a white robe?

Does he have his arms out?

Is he surrounded by lambs or children?

Where do you think we get our images of Jesus?

One Presbyterian pastor says most of our images of Jesus are very similar, and they most represent the cover of a ***Children's Bible.***

Others says we are conditioned by the ***paintings and stained glass*** pictures of Jesus—who is always calm, sometimes in white, surrounded by lambs or children—and often he is blonde and blue-eyed.

Idea from Charlene Han Powell, in her sermon, *Desperate Belief, Day 1*, 2015.

I have to admit that ***my picture of Jesus*** has him in a blue robe—probably something I saw in a book or painting—he always wears sandals, and he is calm, much calmer than me.

I prefer the “flat Jesus” with dark hair and eyes, so that’s what I see.

So, the Jesus of Mark 7 is not the Jesus that most of us picture.

This Jesus—well, ***what is wrong with him?***

Maybe he’s ***tired***, maybe he’s worn out—

it says he was trying to be ***incognito*** when this woman approached him.

He has just finished a load of ministry before arriving in Tyre.

So maybe he’s not up to par when she asks for healing for her daughter.

But Jesus is pretty clear in response to her request.

He has come for God’s people in Israel, and they are the children of God.

She is Gentile, therefore, a dog.

This Syro-Phoenician woman is ***not fazed*** by Jesus’ rebuff.

I love this woman.

She’s ***tough.***

She’s persistent.

She kind of reminds me of the Luke 18 widow who keeps knocking on the door of the judge until he relents and gives her justice.

This woman has absolutely *everything going against her*—
 She is **woman**, so just a piece of property in that day and time.
 She is **alone** talking to a man, instead of sending her request through a man.
 She is a **Gentile**, not a Jew.
 She is **Syro-Phoenician**.
 So her **gender, class, religion, and nationality** are all working against her.
 Add to that the fact that she has a **demon-possessed daughter**,
 and well, we could just call her a **lost cause!**

But wait—what is the **context**?
 Why is Jesus in this **Gentile area** to begin with?
 Jesus didn't stumble upon people and places, he was deliberate,
 so **something in him knew** he had come to the Gentile people,
 not just the Israelites.

So why does he not just say
'even though you are the wrong gender, race, class, and nationality, I will heal your daughter?'
 Why indeed.

Instead Jesus is well, **very human** in this story.

I wonder—what if he is **holding up a mirror** to each one of us?
 Because **WE are the ones who would exclude** this woman.
 WE are the ones who exclude people who do not look and act like us,
 who are not of our race, gender, or nationality!

What if Jesus is **acting like us hard-headed humans** when this woman approaches him?
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

And what if this woman is **just the person to confront his attitude**?
 For she does not **give up, or give in**.
she answered him, "Sir,^[b] even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."
 Wow.
 Now that takes guts.
 And desperation.

She is after all, ***fighting for the life of her daughter.***

As a parent I can identify with wanting, needing, your kid to be healed.

You'll ***do ANYTHING***, right?

You'll ask anyone for help, you'll persist til you get answers,

you'll try absolutely anything, even if it's a long shot.

And this mom—she's got ***guts and incredible faith.***

It is at that moment of her ***great faith***—

her amazing persistent, perseverant faith—that Jesus says to her:

²⁹ *“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.*

Now I think we learn a lot from this story.

A lot about ***persistent faith.***

About having ***courage*** when we are desperate.

About ***reaching out to Jesus*** in our time of need.

There are reasons this story was told by Mark.

It could have easily been edited out of Jesus' life and ministry.

It's a ***scandalous*** story on many levels.

But what if this story teaches us a lot about ***Christianity 101.***

How to treat people.

ESPECIALLY people who are ***not*** like us.

Jesus was a Jewish man.

This was a Syro-Phoenician single mother of a demon-possessed daughter.

They could not be ***more different.***

Who are 'THOSE' people for you and I?

Who are the people who are different?

Who scare us?

Who unnerve us?

Who make us uncomfortable?

Think about that for a minute.

Because we ***ALL have 'those people'.***

Even if we are very welcoming of differences,
 there is something in the human heart that says
 ‘yes Jesus, but don't put me with **those** people’.
 Whoever those people might be.

There is something **insecure** in the human heart—
 a feeling of **insecurity about who we are**, that makes us **put people in boxes**.
 We **segregate** people in our lives,
 on the basis of all kinds of differences.
 We **assign worth** to some, and less worth to others.
 We all do this.

Why?

Maybe because we are **not secure enough** in our identity as children of God,
 so we are **not able to see everyone—as a child of God**.

Maybe because we want the feeling of **power and control**
 that comes from making some people better than others
 in our hearts and minds.
 From treating some people as ‘less than’ others.

But all those classifications, all those status assignments,
 they are **human constructs**, not God's.

The walls and barriers we put between people—
 they are built by us, not God.

Jesus came as peace, to break down dividing walls of hostility between us
 (see Ephesians).

In Jesus' death the **temple curtain was torn**—remember that?

What did that mean?

It meant that the separation between God and humanity was over,
 for that temple curtain separated the presence of God from the people,
 and the priest, who could only enter the Holy of holies once a year!
 When Jesus breathed his last on the cross, that was torn, forever!

And if there is no barrier between us and God,
 why **should there be barriers between the different children** of God?

In the **first century** the people who were excluded were the poor, the orphan, the mentally ill, the sick, the women, the stranger. They were all on the outside looking in, excluded from the life of the community, and the worship of God.

In the 21st century the people who are excluded are whom? In many ways it is the **SAME list**, right? We exclude the poor, orphans, mentally ill, infirm, women, strangers.

And then we could **add more to the list**—like LGBTQ people, people of color, people of other nations, people who are addicted, people who are homeless, people who are immigrants in this country..... They are in many ways on the outside of society, looking in, excluded from the life of community and sometimes, the life of the church.

And it **appears that Jesus is upholding some divisions** in this story. But isn't it interesting how the story ends? That Jesus **does not scold** this brave and desperate woman who comes seeking healing for her young daughter?

When she persists, what does he do? He doesn't scold her persistence. He doesn't ignore her. **He REWARDS her, for her faith!!!!**

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.

This is the **key** to the whole encounter. Jesus acts like we would act, he is pretty darned human, saying look I came for my people only. He shows us what we do all the time. He's holding a **mirror** to our faces.

And then he turns it all upside down and says you know what, **for your faith I will heal!** For **saying** that, for **arguing** with me,

for **disputing** my prejudice,
your daughter has been made well!

You know, this is also a great story for people who think
it's not ok to argue with God.

O yes, it is!

Praise God Almighty!

Argue away.

You've got a beef with God? Take it straight to Jesus.

He'll listen,

And, **respond!**

He did for her—he can do it for you!

Jesus **starts** by being all too human in the story,
and **then** he shows us what he knows in his heart,
what he shows throughout his ministry,
that **God's love and mercy and healing is for ALL people.**
Jew and Gentile, male and female, insider and outsider.

The mercy and grace of God **knows no boundaries,**
no dividing lines, no walls, no social status,
no separation based on any difference whatsoever.

It's **scandalous.**

It's almost unimaginable.

And it's the **Gospel.**

The **Good news** of the Gospel.

The Gospel that makes us shift in our chairs,

the Gospel that makes us **uncomfortable,**

the Gospel that **challenges** our assumptions and our actions.

The Gospel that says if we have faith that all people are children of God,
then let's start acting like it!

That is the Gospel we hear today—

May our **belief** in this Gospel take **root** in our lives.

May our **faith** be **reflected** in our works.

And may all God's people say, Amen.