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Don't Give Up!
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.

Last week in James we talked about how it’s not enough to **just HEAR** God’s Word—we are called to go out **and DO it!**

So, what does **DOING God’s word** mean to you?

What does that include?

Of course we listen to God for the specifics of any situation, but broadly speaking how do we know what to do as Christians?

If someone asked you that, what would you say?

Love God? Love neighbor as yourself?

Do what Jesus would do?

Show Kindness? Humility? Justice?

It’s a good question because it informs our **actions**.

And 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:

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,
We need to **treat everyone** as a child of God!

A few years ago, Rev. Jill Duffield in *The Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, published a top 10 list for living your faith. Here's what she said:

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 are all **basics** of Christian faith,
but they aren't easy!

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

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

As Presbyterians, we often **emphasize our intellect**,

And what we **believe** in our heads.

Which is very important.

But James reminds us that we **can't just believe**—
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 **reveal our faith**.

Like we heard last week, we need **faith AND works**.

Belief AND action.

And then there's this crazy Gospel lesson from Mark!

When I was reading it this week, I thought—
Did **Jesus find it challenging** to put his faith into action?

Some might say that our story today
shows that **He WAS challenged**, at least on this occasion!

In fact, when I read the story I thought,
I'd have to give Jesus **a failing grade--in faith 101!**
He looks at a desperate Gentile mother and **calls her a dog!**—
a slanderous term that Jews often used to refer to non-Jews, or Gentiles.

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?
Does he look calm?
Is he wearing a robe?
Does he have his arms out?
Is he surrounded by lambs or children?

Where do we get our images of Jesus?
One Presbyterian pastor says most of our images are very similar,
and they often represent the cover of a **Children's Bible.**
Others say we are conditioned by **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 **I picture Jesus** 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 picture him dark complexion, dark hair and eyes.

We all have a **picture of Jesus**---but **is that the Jesus** in this story?
I'm wondering-- **what is wrong with him?**
Maybe he's **tired**, maybe he's worn out—
Mark says he was trying to be **incognito** when this woman approached him.
He has just finished a load of ministry,
So maybe he's not up to par when she asks for healing for her daughter.

But Jesus is pretty clear in his response to her request.
He has come for God's people of Israel, they are the children of God.
She is Gentile, therefore, a dog.

But this Syro-Phoenician woman is ***not fazed*** by Jesus' reply!
I love that!
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 is all pretty amazing--because
This woman has absolutely ***NOTHING going for her***—
She is a ***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 in those days!***
But ***this is Jesus, so we expect more***, right?

Instead, we're left wondering, ***why didn't he say: 'even though you are the wrong gender, race, class, and nationality, I will heal your daughter?'***
Why indeed.
We may never know.
Because Jesus is ***very, very human*** in this story.

So--what else might be going on here? Why could he be acting this way?
Well, what if he's ***holding up a mirror*** to each one of us?
Aren't ***WE are the ones who would usually exclude*** this woman?
WE are the ones who ***do*** exclude people, all the time!

What if Jesus is ***acting like us*** when this woman approaches him?
*He says 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 that attitude?***
For she does not ***give up, or give in.***

she answers him,

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Now that takes guts.

And desperation.

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

And as a mom I can identify with the desire to do absolutely everything to help your child!

She does. This mom has ***guts and incredible faith.***

It is at that moment of her ***persistent 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 could learn a lot from this story, like every story in scripture.
A lot about ***persistent faith.***

About ***courage.***

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 we learn from it?

First—the ***persistence.***

Do we have that kind of ***persistent faith?***

Do we have the guts to ***not give up*** on God?

Because this all-too-human Jesus says to this Gentile woman,
you know what, ***for your faith I will heal your daughter!***

For ***not giving up--***

your daughter has been made well!

And isn’t this a great story for people who think
it’s not ok to argue with God?

O yes, it is!

We can always argue with God—there's plenty of precedent in the Bible!
 Jesus will not only listen, he will **respond!**
 He did for her—he can for you!

You know what else we see in this story?
 She was **persistent in another way.**
 She was persistent in **breaking down barriers!**

Jesus was a Jewish man.
 She was a Syro-Phoenician mother of a demon-possessed daughter.
 They were beyond **different.**

Who are the people who are so different—from us?
Who are THOSE PEOPLE—who might scare us? unnerve us?
 Or make us uncomfortable?

Think about that for a minute.
 Because we **ALL have 'those people'.**

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?

Well, aren't we very **tribal** as human beings?
 We prefer to be in **'our' group**, right?
 That's really gotten out of hand with all the nationalism and populism—
 That's happening all around us right now.

None of it is helpful—
 because it prevents us from **seeing everyone else—as a child of God.**
 It pits neighbor against neighbor as **enemies**,
 and builds **dividing walls** of our own making!

It also leads to this evil desire for **power or 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 the divisions, all the tribalism,
 These things are **our human constructs**, not God's.
 And this woman pushes back against it with Jesus!

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 community.

In the 21st century the people who are excluded are...
 In many ways the **SAME**, right?
 We still exclude the poor, the mentally ill...but we also exclude people like
 LGBTQ people, people of color, people of other nationalities,
 people who are addicted, or homeless, those who are immigrants.....
 They are in many ways on the outside, looking in,
 And all too often excluded from community.

And it **appears, at first, that Jesus is upholding divisions like this--**
 But isn't it interesting how his tone changes?
 That wall between her and the children of Israel—
She doesn't give up---she argues about that wall!
 Claiming her right to receive God's gifts, even if it's crumbs from a table!
 She's essentially saying to Jesus, **I too am a child of God!**

And he agrees.
 He has a change of heart!
 He **does not scold** this brave and desperate woman!
 When she persists, what does he do?
He REWARDS her faith and persistence!!!!

he says to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ she went home, found the child on the bed, and the demon gone.

So, **Jesus starts** by being **all too human** in this story,
 and **then** he shows us--what he will go on to show throughout his ministry,
 that **God's love and mercy and healing is for ALL people.**
 And God is a God who rewards persistent faith!

You know what I take home from this?

Don't ever give up, especially on God!

We are called to ***persist in faith, live*** our faith, and ***stay true*** to our faith.

We are called to ***break down*** any divisions,
and ***treat all people*** as children of God.

Easier said than done,

but worthwhile—every moment, of every day.

That is the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today—

And for it all God's people say together, Amen.