

“Ask for What You Need”

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, September 6, 2015
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: James 2:1-10 and Mark 7:24-31

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

James 2:1-10

From there 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. 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.

Mark 7:24-31

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard from sacred scripture and the words that you have placed upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

I have already learned this morning at 10 after the first two services that this may not be an easy sermon. It has political undertones, undercurrents, etc. It seems to be maybe picking on someone. It seems maybe that I'm trying to belittle someone and all of those things I acknowledge that it might look like it, but that is not the heart of the message that I am trying to deliver. I was asked by someone in our congregation, how might we address some of the members in our families when they talk about things from a very conservative theological position. They said that often when they are together as a family and a discussion comes up, those folks all are talking and that this woman and her husband found themselves remaining quiet. They didn't know what to say or how to speak into what they were hearing. I want to offer some sense of how we might respond to things theologically and biblically as Presbyterians. And I do that mindful that I do it, as I said in my very first sermon, somewhere between the Bible and the news of the day. And I offer this in that in between space, and don't claim it as true in the sense of capital T Truth, or right in the sense of capital R Righteousness. I offer it as a pastoral reflection and as a way to think about what it means for us to be Christian and Presbyterian and engaged in the dialogue of the day.

I do this also mindful of the Gospel passage where Jesus, it seems, left the area of the Israelites and went out into the area of the Gentiles to basically go and hide, to be away, to be quiet and calm, to stop what he was doing, and a Gentile woman heard that he was there and went to him and begged him from his feet to heal her daughter. Jesus tells her a story, an analogy, and says *I am here to feed the children. I can't take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* It seems to be Jesus is saying he has a clear sense of what his mission and purpose is—it is to come to the Israelites to offer them the salvation and the promise that God has given to them and that's it. And then she, in her wisdom, her tenacity, her desire for her daughter to be healed and healthy says to him, *yes, Sir, but even the dog's under the table eat the children's crumbs.* And in saying this, Jesus has an “aha moment”. He realizes that maybe the mission and ministry that he thought he was about is something else. Maybe it's the first time he encounters a Gentile who has faith in his power, his promise and his ability. But whatever it is when she says that phrase, he says to her *go, you daughter is healed.* What she wants happens. Her faith is affirmed. The demon is gone. I think that Jesus' sense of mission and purpose is now transformed and expanded. Yes, he is there to feed the children but he is also there to feed the Gentiles and every other person of faith. Because this woman has faith in his ability. According to every law and custom and tradition that the Israelites have held, she should not be someone that he is interacting with. She should not be someone that he is paying attention to and she definitely is not someone who he should use his healing power to help. And yet he does all those things. All of those things happen because of her begging for her daughter's wellbeing.

Now the situation I was asked about earlier, about how do we speak into this and be a part of this conversation centers around a woman named Kim Davis. Anybody heard of her this week? A clerk in Moorhead, Kentucky, who has decided to stop issuing marriage licenses because she does not want to violate her Christian faith. Her faith in her understanding is that she cannot offer a license to a same-gender couple, and so she decided she is not going to give out any of them. The basis for her doing so is a clear sense and articulation that she is a Christian, and that's why she is doing it. She is now in jail because the courts have found her in contempt and put her in jail. So there is this argument that is emerging that somehow because of her belief in Jesus Christ she is being persecuted and is imprisoned because of that.

I want to look at that from a theological perspective, from a Presbyterian perspective and a biblical perspective, not to cast judgment or innuendo or make some political statement, but simply to allow us to think about how do we engage in these conversations with folks, maybe we are some of

them, who have these strong convictions. How do we engage in dialogue?

First I want to lift up her statement. I'm sure that she has offered many statements but this is the one that seems to be bedrock as I looked at several of the things that were attributed to her in quotations. Her statement is: "I owe my life to Jesus Christ, who loves me and gave his life for me. Following the death of my godly mother-in-law over four years ago, I went to church to fulfill her dying wish. There I heard a message of grace and forgiveness and surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. I am not perfect, no one is, but I am forgiven and I love my Lord and must be obedient to him and to the word of God." As I read this statement and as I have reflected on it, I find myself saying again and again, Amen. I owe my life to Jesus Christ. Amen. Who loves me and gave his life for me. Amen. On and on and on—there is part of me that says amen, amen, amen. But as I have reflected on it, I realize that there is something that makes me uncomfortable about her statement. I owe my life to Jesus who loves me and gave his life for me. I went to church. I heard the message. I am not perfect. I am forgiven. And I love the Lord and must be obedient to him and to the word of God. I, I, I, I, I.

As Presbyterians we affirm the right of conscience and personal expression of faith. We say amen to whatever your profession of faith is. If you want to articulate your belief in Jesus Christ in one way, we say amen, you have that right. But as Presbyterians we also recognize and remember that the exercise of our individual right is always done in community. That I am part of something bigger than myself. I am part of this body of Christ, and that there is always a tension and a dialogue between what I think and what the community thinks and it is in that tension and conversation that my personal experience adds a richness but it's always done in understanding that it is part of a bigger story. And I just want to frame that for us because how do we as Presbyterians and as Christians engage in conversation. One of the ways for us to be able to have a place in a conversation that is theologically troubling or difficult is to know that as Presbyterians, we honor the individual and the community and it's always and the community. That might be a place for us to enter into the conversation.

When you become a member of the Presbyterian Church, there is one question that you are asked. Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? The answer, hopefully, is the affirmative yes and you become a member. We do not ask your political aspirations or views. We do not ask your position on scripture or on any contemporary or social issue. We don't ask how much you are going to give or not give. We don't ask anything else beyond is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior. That's what matters. And when you say "yes", you become the body of Christ. And then, as Presbyterians you become part of the community and we begin together to move and form and figure out who we are and what we believe and how we are going to be in the world. I and the community together. We don't discriminate on any answer to any question beyond that single question. Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Yes or no? It's that simple for us. That's what membership in the body of Christ and in the promise of God is all about.

One of the questions I was asked was, "Can you give me some scripture that would help me engage in the conversation? Can you help me think about it from a biblical perspective? How might I be in conversation?" Again, going back to this statement and then looking at scripture. *I owe my life to Jesus Christ who loves me and gave his life for me.* That's this woman's statement. But what would our statement as Presbyterians be? It would be something very similar but maybe just a little bit different. *I owe my life to Jesus Christ who loves me and gave his life for us all.* And if that sounds weird, hear John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Yes, Jesus Christ died for you and, the communal part, Jesus Christ died for the world and for everybody in it. That's what we believe as Presbyterians. It's not just me, it's us and beyond us. It's the world. It's both and, it's not either or.

At the end of her statement she says “I am forgiven and I love my Lord and must be obedient to him and to the word of God.” Every time I hear that I wonder which parts of the word will you be obedient to? I don't know what parts she will choose and I don't know what parts other people will choose. I could guess but seems to go way too far down the road. I just want to offer, again, resources to think about when we are engaged in conversation about what words we might be obedient to. From Galatians: *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, as many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* When we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, the lines of differentiation are erased. We become one. We do not lose our identity but we become one, part of the body of Christ. Paul goes on in Galatians 5: *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another, for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* It's easy to love those that are like us and near us. It is so difficult for us to love our neighbors who are different than who we are, or who believe different things than what we believe.

The word of God says that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It does not qualify who or what that neighbor needs to be. In Philippians chapter 2: *If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete. Be of the same mind having the same love. Be of full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let each of you look not to your own interest but to the interest of others.* Again a passage that we often hear and think, oh, it's beautiful. We regard others to be better than ourselves, but when we are in those tough situations, we need to honor this word of God. It's not easy, but it's there.

And finally 1 John, chapter 4: *God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they abide in God.* That goes back to our is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior question. In 1 John chapter 4 it says if you confess “yes” that God abides in those who confess that Jesus is Son of God and they abide in God. *So we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this; that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is so we are in this world. There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear and fear as to do with punishment. And whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say I love God and hate their brothers and sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

These passages are the word of God as much or more than any other passage you can lift out from scripture and say this is the word of God. These passages encourage us to realize that we are part of the body of Christ, that we are grounded by our profession of faith in that body and that our challenge, our job, our responsibility is to offer love to those people who are in front of us—our neighbors. It is not easy, at times it may be a challenge, but it is the word of God. Amen.