December 12/13, 2020

A Christmas Full of Presence

Hope-Filled Christmas Series

Mark 7: 24-37

Pastor Josh Luse

Ready for Christmas? It's coming closer and closer. Some of you say, "Yeah, I've been ready since August when the decorations hit the department stores' shelves, and we're ready to go." I heard that some of you even had your tree up before Thanksgiving this year. Is that true of anybody in here? You're making the rest of us look bad here! So you're thinking, "Oh, I've got plenty of time. Christmas Eve is still down the road. I'm going to do it all then." Yesterday I woke up and went downstairs, and I was reading. My daughter came downstairs; she saw the snow and she said, "Christmas is getting closer." For her, that was what was triggering it.

We've been in a season of Advent as a church—that is waiting for something to arrive—an eager expectation. Much like those in the Old Testament, we're waiting for a Messiah that would come at some point. In our Advent season, we realize that we're also waiting for Christ's return, and so within that season of expectation, we want to live fully present in lives that are full of *worship*. We talked about that, our first week.

Last week, Ryan brought us along into living a life that is full of *generosity*, with no need to worry about the needs, or the things that I have that I can be anxious about, or how will God provide, because God has it all. I can trust Him, and because of His generosity, I can continue to let His generosity flow through me!

This week, we want to talk about living lives that are filled with *presence*—maybe not the presents that you're thinking about—but your physical presence—you being there. Because in John chapter 1, verse 14, it says, "**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us; *a*nd we have seen His glory, as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."**

The word that's actually used there, is that "*He became flesh and He tabernacled among us."* The Old Testament readers that would have seen that, they realized God's presence had dwelt in a tabernacle. But now with Jesus' coming—being born—*the Word became flesh*. Jesus put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood, and He was with us. We're going to talk a little bit more about what happened with His presence being here among us, and what that means for us as well. We're looking at Mark, Chapter 7. But before we get started, I'm just going to open with a word of prayer.

> *Jesus, we thank You that You are here with us now. Father, we want to hear from You. Spirit, we open our hearts to listen to Your words. We don't merely want to walk away with more intellectual knowledge. Jesus, we want to walk away changed and transformed by You, knowing how Your Spirit wants to move and work within us even now, in the time we have together through Your precious Word. But, Father, how You want to open the doors for this week, the plans that You have for us. So we ask that You would guide us. We ask that we would listen and be ready. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

We're going to start in Mark chapter 7, verse 24. It says:

> **And from there he arose and he went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and he did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** (*ESV, Mark 7:24-28)

I'm going to pause here for just a moment. Do you ever have those moments where you're reading the Bible, and you get to a spot and you read it and you stop, you kind of scratch your head, and think, "What in the world is happening here?" And then you just decide, "I'm flipping the page; let's see what the next page can do." That might be a little bit of what you're feeling right now, because we jumped right into the middle of Mark. So, let me give you a little context to the story that's taking place.

If you were to go back earlier in chapter 7, you'll see that Jesus is there and the Pharisees continued to try and target Him, the way a bully would target their victim on the playground. And they've come from Jerusalem to follow Jesus around. He's starting to challenge their teachings; He's starting to tread on their territory, and they're getting a bit worried. And so they're watching Jesus' every move, and they notice that His disciples are not washing their hands before they eat. So what do they do? They go to Jesus and actually call Him out, in the beginning of chapter 7. And they're saying, "Why do Your disciples break tradition and eat with defiled hands?" Now to understand a little more context to the history of what's going on here, there were a couple of different things that were at play within this culture. One was that there were some people that believed in a superstition that spirits would reside in your arms and hands, and so if you didn't wash and then you ate, that's how they would become possessed by that spirit. No, that's not true. That's not really what's happening within here, but that was a thought within the context of that culture.

But what the Pharisees were really latching onto was this idea of ceremonial washings. They'd actually hijacked God's plan for priests to ceremonially wash before going and performing duties in the temple. It was a way for the priests to, as a symbol, cleanse themselves before going to a holy God. And they had distorted this, and they had taken this teaching and had manipulated it into their tradition. This was not anything that was in the Mosaic Law. This was merely their way of allowing a new tradition to grow, that would allow for racial and social prejudice to continue on. And Jesus spots this. So maybe, as a Jew was in the marketplace and walking, they may have accidentally rubbed up against a Gentile or another outsider. And so they needed to then wash the uncleanliness of that Gentile or that outsider off of them before they ate. This would go to such great bounds that they would ceremonially wash their utensils, or their bowls or cups, not because it could have food or germs that needed to be washed out, but because maybe a Gentile had actually used that before them. And they definitely wanted to wash that off, if that were the case. So Jesus confronts them. He says, *"Hey, it's not what you eat, what goes into the body, or what's on the outside that defiles you. It's what comes from within. It's the heart."*

And the same account is found in Matthew, chapter 15. And what's interesting is the disciples hear Jesus saying this and they say, "Jesus, do You realize You may have just insulted the Pharisees? Jesus, do you understand what's just happening here? These Pharisees were offended." So Jesus continues to teach His disciples and draw them in. But it's out of this conversation, and out of what's just happened here that we come now to Mark chapter 7, verse 24. So knowing that, let's continue on. Well, actually, one more verse in Mark chapter 7, verse 6. Jesus quotes to the Pharisees from Isaiah, and He says: "**These people have honored me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me."** And from there, He leaves. And we go to verse 24 where he picks it up and He says, "**And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon."**

Now for us, we can keep going past this and just think, okay, it's another place on the map, but for the first readers, this would have stood out. Because Jesus spent most of His time in the Galilean region or in Jerusalem—for sure in the Jewish territory—but this was not in the Jewish territory. From the Sea of Galilee, you would have headed up north and then west, to the Mediterranean coast, a beautiful area. He could have gone there, and maybe taken in the breeze that's coming off the Mediterranean Sea, to get away. It tells us that He wanted to get maybe some rest, maybe some time with His disciples to teach them. He wanted to get away. Maybe it was because the Pharisees and the religious leaders kept pressing in on Him, but He goes outside of the Jewish region. This is the only place in Scripture that we find that Jesus' final destination, intentionally, was outside of the Jewish region. Now, outside of this area, who is He going to encounter? The outsiders. The Gentiles. It's as though Jesus is saying His kingdom knows no boundaries. He's pushing against the boundaries and the lines that have been drawn.

It makes me think of this year, 2020, which has had some lines drawn this year, hasn't it? Some racial lines, some social lines, some political lines, some geographical lines. All of these lines continue to confine and push in, "You need to stay in your lines." Let's see what Jesus continues to do. **He entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet He could not be hidden.** People had heard about His ministry, even that far away. Verse 25:

> **But immediately a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.**

Did you ever have one of those days where you're trying to get away, you're trying to unplug a bit, and immediately somebody comes to you with a problem? Maybe, moms, you can relate to this. You're trying to get just a breather away from the kids. You go in the bathroom, just to get away, and immediately somebody's knocking on the door with a problem. Jesus is trying to get a little bit of rest, and yet He's encountering a woman instantly with a problem. Mark goes on to give us some clear definition of who it is that He's talking with. Verse 26, says:

> **Now the woman was a Gentile, as Syrophoenician by birth.**

Mark starts to spell out all the ways that this woman already had strikes against her. First of all, he's mentioned it already; she's a woman. In this day and age that she's living in, there are certain boundaries that have already been established for her. She wasn't held in the same class as a man at that time, for sure not a religious man. She would have had different rules imposed on her. She

would have had to live in a completely different way, and for her to have a conversation with Jesus, it was unheard of. So already she's got this strike against her. But not only that. He tells us that she was a Gentile; she was an outsider. All we have to do again is read the beginning of chapter 7 in Mark and we see how that already has all these social implications on her. They treat her, not as the same; she was an outsider. It actually tells us she was a Syrophoenician. In Matthew chapter 15, and we'll go back and forth between Matthew a little bit, so if you want to stick your finger in there, that might help you along. But in verse 22, it describes her as a **Canaanite woman.**

Early readers would have definitely understood that she's a descendant of their ancient enemies. Remember when the children of Israel are trying to come into the promised land, and who is there? The Canaanites! There were this evil people that would sacrifice their children to these gods. They would've had unbridled immorality. They're also in this area of Tyre and Sidon. All throughout the Old Testament, the prophets would condemn these places because of their Baal worship, and because of their arrogant materialism. So, if we're adding up all the strikes, she's already got this against her. And I wonder if the disciples are sitting there wondering, "Will Jesus accept this woman? Is He going to draw boundaries that she's already outside of?" Mark is trying to build tension, and to help us out, Matthew gives us a few other details that show us the tension that's being built in this situation.

In Matthew chapter 15, verse 23, it says that she came crying to Jesus, but Jesus is silent. It says, **He did not answer her a word**. Now some of the modern paraphrases say that Jesus ignored her, but that's a misuse of the wording that's here. But Jesus was quiet. He stood back and He started to let this unfold. I'm wondering if He's trying to watch how His disciples are going to interact, or if He's waiting to figure out how best to communicate and talk with this woman? So how do the disciples react? Well, in Matthew chapter 15, after it says *He did not answer her a word*, His disciples came and begged Him saying, (I'm sure their hearts were pure and they were like, "Jesus, please help her.") But listen to what they said, **"Send her away, for she is crying out after us."** I'm sure you and I would never do something like this, right? We're trying to get away; we're trying to just unplug. When somebody comes with a problem, we would want to just jump in and help. Right? That's us. But this is the disciples.

It kind of reminds me of a couple weeks ago—actually, about a month ago—my wife and I were traveling and we got onto a plane. I don't know why it is that there's always stories on planes. There always is, right? And as we sit down, there's a woman that boards the plane right behind us. No one else is sitting next to her in the other two seats. But all of a sudden, the whole plane knows that she's there, because she sits down, and you can hear her from any place in the plane. And she tells us that she's going to visit her mother and her sisters are going to be there and her sisters are freaks. And I look over at my wife and I say, "How long is this flight? And at this moment, if she says ten minutes, I'm saying, "That's too long!" And then she continues to unfold her story. She's had a few drinks before she's got onto the plane, so she's sharing freely all the things that are going on in her life. An hour later, she continues to talk, so I've stuck my earphones in by this time and I'm trying to read, but all I can hear is a continuation of her story, just muffled out. We land. The poor lady that's been right next to her has been listening the entire time. For me, I'm thinking, I've got to use that exit; it doesn't matter if we're on the ground or in the air. But we start getting off the plane, deplaning, right? And there's a certain order that we have in these things; we all know the unwritten rules. People in front go first, and then it continues back farther and farther. Well, she

stands up and she says, “I need to go,” and she goes in front of me. At this point, I'm thinking, “That's fine, go. Jesus, please take her, right?” And so she starts going off the plane. I start getting my bag. I pull it down and sit down, and she looks back and she says, “Hey, will you carry my bag?” She's going to ask me to carry her bags. But she noticed I have bags, so she starts walking more. Again, she kind of turns around, “Hey, will you carry my bags?” “Oh, you've got bags,” and she turns around. Now, at this moment, I could have had the opportunity to carry her bags. I mean, look at me, right? I could have carried a couple more bags. But there was something in me that was thinking she needs to learn her lesson. If you're not so annoying, people will want to carry your bags. We get off the plane; we get in the car, and my wife notices what's been taking place. And she's really good at this. She asked me, “Josh, why didn't you offer to help carry that woman's bags?” And so we dialogue a little bit about it. And I realized that I'm kind of thinking I need to teach her a lesson. I realize it's not my job to teach this person a lesson. That's not what Jesus asked me to do. Jesus asked me to serve her. But in this moment, she was unacceptable; her behavior was unacceptable. And God started really working in my heart, and I saw this very clearly. When I'm focusing on myself and my plan, people become problems. But when I'm focused on Jesus, and His plan, I realize that people have problems. Did you get that? When I'm focusing on myself, and what I want to do, people become the problem. They get in my way; they interrupt my schedule; they ask things of me that I didn't want to give them. But when my heart is changed, when I'm focusing on Jesus and His mission, I see that people have a problem that Jesus is presently already working in their lives with, and He's inviting me to join with them, in that problem.

The disciples are in this spot, where they're navigating what to do, but it's going to cost them something. The question is, “Will Jesus be attentive to this need?” There's a reason why we say, “Pay attention,” because whenever you give someone else your attention, it's going to cost you something. So how does Jesus respond? He's a master storyteller. So she's begging Him to cast the demon out of her daughter, and in verse 27 of Mark chapter 7:

> **He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”**

Now Jesus, remember, is a master storyteller. Jesus paints pictures with words, He uses stories and parables to help people understand something. He's been sitting back and observing and listening and watching, and He gives a statement to this woman. Now already in this conversation, Jesus has been unfolding other pieces for her, but He gives her this picture.

Imagine, with me, a highchair and you've got a two-year-old sitting in this highchair. It's about time to eat. This little guy is hungry, and just over here in the kitchen, mom is preparing this plate. If you can imagine with me, there's a mound of mashed potatoes with butter sliding down on it, right? There's warm bread that's so soft, you can tear it open. There's butter, now, inside that bread. She's got the perfect steak there. You're saying, “For a two-year-old?” Yeah, this is Nebraska, right? Okay, so the perfect steak. So she grabs this plate and she brings it over, and as she's walking towards this two-year-old, his eyes are gleaming. Smelling it, he starts bouncing in his seat, he's so excited—and she puts it on the floor for the dog to eat. Why would she do this?

This is the picture that Jesus has begun to paint. Now Jesus is not being derogatory in the way that the Pharisees would have used the term **dog**. There is a term that they would have used that would

speak to the dogs that were wild, that were homeless, that were scavengers, maybe the same way that we would call somebody a rat, or worse. But the Greek word that's used here is *little dog.* It's referred to as a pet in the home. Now for sure, this statement still seems offensive, right? Why would I not get this goodness, right? But notice how she continues to respond, because she understands that there's a covenant. She doesn't argue. She says, **"Yes, Lord."**

Now Jesus, earlier in Matthew chapter 15, when His disciples were begging Him to send her away, **He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."** God had a plan that He was unfolding. He had made a covenant with a man named Abraham that He would bless them, and He would make them into a great nation. And God had continued to unfold this plan. And it was understood these were God's chosen people, His elect. What had these people done? Nothing, absolutely nothing to deserve God's grace, His goodness. And yet God was going to use them and work through them as an instrument of His grace. But it wasn't going to just stop there, because in Genesis chapter 12, verses 2 and 3, he said, *"I will bless you, Abraham, so that you can be a blessing. And this blessing will extend to all the families of the earth."*

This woman, when she first met Jesus in Matthew chapter 15, called him **Lord, son of David**. This is a Messianic term. She had some understanding that this Jesus was the one that came to rescue; this Jesus could do things. She had heard of this Jesus, and she was understanding more and more. Maybe she had even known a little bit of Luke chapter 2, verse 10, and the message that had been announced to those shepherds, **"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people** (everyone), **for a Savior is born."**

We now can look back and we know that Romans 1:16 tells us, **For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

Now, Matthew also gives us some more of her wording in this conversation. When she first comes and asks Jesus for help, she says, "*Oh, Lord, son of David, have mercy on me."* She then goes and says, *"Lord, help me.*" She's not coming with entitlement, thinking that God owes her something. She's not prideful to think that she can somehow manage this herself. She could have. She could have gone on with her own plans and gone to Eshmun, the pagan god temple that was not far from there, about three miles away from Sidon. But she didn't. She came to Jesus because she realized she had a need that was too big for her to meet. But she also realized that Jesus has enough mercy that could extend beyond the borders just from the Jews.

I wonder how that relates for you and me? Maybe some of us think that we just don't need God; we can do this on our own. In our arrogant pride, we're going to miss the opportunities with Jesus and our relationship with Him, because we think, "We're good; we can do it." Maybe for some of us, we think God owes us something; we're entitled to something. So, when situations and things don't go our way, we say, "God, that's it. We're out." Maybe others of us in this room think, "I've messed up too much. I'm too much on the outside. There's no way that Jesus could ever help me." But God's grace and His mercy blows up those categories, because it's just us that's standing in the way on both of those—either our pride or our inability to accept His mercy. But Jesus' grace is big enough for the entire world. It's big enough to cover everything you've done, everything you will do. It's big enough to cover your pride.

So how does she respond?

> "**Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** (Vs. 28)

Even the dogs under the table, eat the children's crumbs? Sure, I'm going to serve this child first. Sure, God had come in the form of Jesus to come and rescue the Jewish people to give them the bread of life. But there's enough bread for the dogs too. Have you ever seen a two-year-old eat? More food goes on the floor than it does in that two-year-old's mouth. There's enough for everyone. And she pleads for that. So how does Jesus respond? He said to her, **"For this statement, you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter"** and she went home, and she found the child lying in the bed and the demon gone. Now Matthew gives us even more of the emotion that's taking place. As Jesus answers her, Matthew chapter 15, verse 28**:**

> **And Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.**

You see this woman's faith? She came believing that Jesus could do something. She was relentlessly asking what she knew to be true from this man. And then as she leaves in verse 30 of Mark 7, it says **she went home**. She didn't say, "I'm going to go grab my daughter and bring her back just to make sure." She wasn't scared that when she went home that Jesus would somehow be gone, that was her one shot. She had faith and believed, and her life was transformed. Let's continue on, because in the next verse, there's another story in Mark 7, verse 31:

> **Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Decapolis.**

So again, Jesus is staying outside the borders. He goes up north, then He travels east, around the Sea of Galilee, all the way to the south side, and then back up again to a Gentile territory—again to people outside the boundary. Again, I'm wondering if people will wonder as they come? Will Jesus accept them? Will He be attentive to their needs? Will He adapt His plans to what God brings before Him? Then it says, verse 32,

> **And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue**. (Vs. 32-33)

Again, we're at one of those spots in the Bible where we're like, "Okay, we've got a weird conversation up here; we've got a weird situation here. Let's flip the page," right? But again, think of what Jesus is doing. How often do you and I serve others in a way that serves *us* best? I'll help if it fits into *my* schedule. Sure, I'll pay attention to this, but only for this amount of time. I'll give this much of my resources as long as it doesn't creep into the things that I want to do in my plans. We so often serve others with our interest first, not theirs.

But Jesus accepts people where they're at. He's attentive to their needs, and He adapts to serve them in a way that serves them best. For sure, He could have made a spectacle of this. People love that. He could have had the limelight for that, but that's not what this man needed. He takes this

man aside privately, and He starts to communicate with him one-on-one in a way that this man would understand. Think through what this man's life had been like. He can't hear people talking to him, communicating with him. He can't communicate back. Life with these challenges in that day and age that he's living in, would have been hard. He's begging; he's ostracized; he's an outsider. So Jesus comes and He starts to communicate in a way that this man can understand. He puts His fingers in his ears and He says, "I know the problem that's there; we're going to solve that." He touches his tongue, as if to say, "I know the problem that exists there; we're going to solve that." Verse 34:

> **And looking up to heaven, (**as if to show this man where His power and His strength comes from) **he sighed and says to him, "Ephphatha,"** which is an Aramaic word, **"Be opened."**

Now the word that's used here for **sighs**, is the same Greek word that we find in Romans chapter 8, for this *deep groaning*. It gives us a picture into Jesus as He sees the brokenness of this world and the brokenness in this man, and how much He wants to be a part of the restoration and bring hope. So what does He do? He adapts to what God is doing. He asks His Father, and His Father opens his ear. That which Jesus has created, this man's ears obey the Creator. His lips are open. Verse 35:

> **And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one**. (But how could they? This was too amazing, right**?) But the more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute speak**." (Vs. 35-37)

Again, He's in a situation where, I'm sure they're wondering, will He accept this person? Will He be attentive to their needs? Will He adapt to help? And Jesus continues to do this uniquely. You look all through Mark and you see the way that Jesus would adjust and adapt every step along the way. Actually, in Mark chapter 5, we meet a man named Jairus, and his daughter is very sick. She's going to die. With urgency this man goes to Jesus, pleading for Him to come and heal his daughter, and so Jesus starts to make His way to their home. But I think Jesus is still wanting to build this man's faith more. This guy is thinking that as long as Jesus gets there before she dies, everything will be okay.

Along the way, Jesus is walking through a crowd and a woman touches Him, a woman that's been ostracized, a woman that's unclean, so she has to remain unnoticed and outside society. What does Jesus do? He stops and He asks, "Who touched me?" Like, "You're crazy, Jesus, we're all pressing in. What do you mean, who touched you?" Again, He asks, and this woman acknowledges that, "It was me," and she was healed. But Jesus didn't want to just heal her. He wanted her to be noticed, to be valued. He finally gets to Jairus' home and this girl has died. They say, "You know what? It's too late; you didn't need to come." Jesus said, **"She's not dead. She's sleeping.**" They laugh, and yet He displays His power and healing, again, to meet the situation that's there in that moment. Again, and again, and again, Jesus adapts to different needs in different ways to serve the people that He's with. At the end of this, we look back and we see a glimpse to the bigger picture.

There's actually a Greek word found in verse 32 for this speech impediment. There's only one other place in the Bible where this Greek word is found, and that's in the Old Testament Greek translation in the book of Isaiah, that speaks to the Savior that is coming, the way that He's going to transform this world, the way that His presence will make all sorts of incredible things start to happen. Isaiah chapter 35, verses 4-6 say: **He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.**

As Jesus left this Gentile region, at the end of Matthew chapter 15, all the outsiders—the people who've been around—listen to what they started to say. Matthew 15, verse 31: **And they glorified the God of Israel.**

It makes me ask this question, "What difference did Jesus' presence here on this earth make? How was Him being here among us, a gift to those people that He was around?" Jesus was constantly giving them hope. He was bringing them healing. He was inspiring them to worship, to realize that the Word became flesh and dwelt among them, and they saw His glory. What's incredible is He lived this perfect, sinless life. He died on the cross, rose again, and offers life to anyone who will trust in Him.

Only now He resides in the life of His church. His presence dwells in you and in me, which makes me have to ask this question: *"How are you a gift in the life of other people?"* How is your *presence* something that is a gift to the people around you? But don't get me wrong. It's not *you*. *You* can't save them; *you* can't heal them—but *it's Jesus living in and through you.* So how is that making an impact in the world where we live, that is longing for hope, especially in this season?

What is it that you're joining into? Now, this could be just attentiveness. Maybe this starts in your home. Are you giving your kids your *presence*—your undivided attention—or are you completely distracted? Are you seeing them through screens, or through your spare moments, or are you being intentional with them? What about the people at work? Are there people at work that God has placed in your path, so your presence can be a gift to them? Maybe it's beyond that. Maybe it's those that are outside your boundaries that you've drawn, that God still wants you to serve and care for. They're not the problem; they have a problem that you can join into, in introducing them to Jesus or helping with the needs that they may have. Maybe it's somewhere outside of where you live. Maybe it's another part of Lincoln. Maybe it's specifically realizing that there are people in our city, in our community, that have needs and deep hurts that you can join with. That's why we gave you the opportunity for a few ideas in our handout, that you can pick up in the hallway or if you're online with us, you can go to our Advent section, and find some ways that you could use your time to serve others. You could use your *presence* to be a gift in the life of others. But it's not just trying harder, like Ryan said last week. It all starts with *worship* and abiding *presence* with Jesus. It's not that I'm just going to try to be nicer or do better things or help people. It's that I want to draw near to Jesus in a way where He shows me opportunities and ways that I can serve others as I walk through my week.

I remember when we first moved to Lincoln, we lived in a little duplex at 9th and South. And I was excited because we were renting, and I could finally put my mower and my shovel away. We didn't have a garage, so we rented a little storage unit. And I realized, since we were renting, *they*

were going to take care of that stuff. And when the first winter came, I remember walking outside my door and seeing our sidewalk, right in front of our little duplex, had already been scooped. I thought, “This is awesome!” Now looking over about ten feet, there's another duplex facing our duplex, and I saw that their walk had not been scooped. We'd been getting to know the others that were around there, and I realized one of them was a single mom that was there, and as I was stepping outside, it was like the Spirit was telling me, “Hey, Josh, you should go scoop her sidewalk.” And so God and I got into this conversation at this point. “Oh, God, remember, You gave us this duplex to bless me, so I wouldn't have to scoop. That's why my shovel is in storage where it should be right now, right?” So He said, “Yeah, *I'm blessing you so that you can be a blessing.*” Okay, so I go, and I get the shovel and I start to shovel their walk. You know, at first I didn't even know if they knew it was me. I'm thinking how's this going to benefit anything, right? But it's not about me. It's about God and His plans. God actually used that to open up our doors to have them into our home for conversations and meals.

And it started with abiding with Jesus and adapting to His plan. Be attentive to the needs of others and accept people no matter who they are, realizing that they are part of God's huge redemptive plan, that He's inviting you to be a part of.

Jesus, thank You so much that You are present here with us. Thank You for the gift of Your Son coming into this broken world in need of a Savior. Thank You that You were not okay leaving us in need, but You came. Thank You for the way that You came and lived among us and displayed Your love and Your generosity and Your hope and Your grace, Your healing. Thank You that You are not okay with keeping it in the bounds of the Jewish region alone, but You gave a gift that would be a gift for the entire world. Jesus, we want to continue to walk with You this week, to be in step with You. We don't want to miss the opportunities that You've given us to be present in the lives of others in a way that we can display Your grace, Your love, Your service, so that our presence is a gift to them. Jesus, please give us that opportunity this week. Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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