Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)
Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Let us continue our worship together in prayer: Nurturing Lord, open our ears to what you would have us hear and our eyes to the new things you are doing in our midst, so that we might see you at work in and through us. If these words be Thy Word, may they adhere to our hearts, forever transforming us into who you would have us be, though who art our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Acts 8:26-40
Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"
He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:
"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The Stories of God for the people of God… **thanks be to God.**

Some of you may have seen in recent publications from MPC that Session has voted for us to become a More Light Presbyterian congregation and a Matthew 25 congregation. Through the summer and into the fall, and with the guidance of the Christian Education & Social Justice Committee, we are going to roll out what those two decisions mean. Quickly though, I can remind you that Matthew 25 contains the passage that reminds us to feed those who are hungry, give a drink to those who are thirsty, welcome someone who is a stranger, clothe someone who is naked, visit someone who is in prison. There will be much more on Matthew 25 to come.

Today's sermon is going to focus on the decision to become designated as a More Light Presbyterian congregation.

I'm going to hit you with three statistics right off the bat. They come from the CDC and the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. They are footnoted in the paper copies of the sermon and the copy you can find online:

1. Research shows that LGBTQIA+ youth (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) attempt suicide at 5x the rate of the national average.[1]
2. LGBTQIA+ individuals from families who do not accept them attempt suicide at 8x the rate of other LGBTQIA+ individuals.[2]
3. Young LGBTQIA+ people who stated that religion was very important to them had suicide rates as much as 4x higher than the rates of non-religious LGBTQIA+ youth and nearly 10x the rates for individuals identifying as cisgender and heterosexual.[3]

There will be time to unpack all of the initials and labels later, for now all we need to know is this: there are children and youth and young adults of Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church who are in danger - and the Session has voted unanimously to do something about it by choosing to become a designated More Light Presbyterian congregation.

It is true, that MPC very much leans towards welcoming and accepting of all of God's beloved children. This church has long been a place where some have been able to worship - and even lead worship- with welcome and affirmation. This isn't to say the shadows of homophobia and fear or uncomfortableness with "the other" don't linger in even our more recent past. But overall, and certainly compared to the vast majority of religious institutions in our area – we are welcoming and accepting.

In a letter written by a member of our congregation to MPC's Christian Education & Social Justice Committee, one of the parents who asked us to look into becoming a More Light congregation wrote:

> *When (our daughter) invited her transgender friend to worship with us, his response was, "Hell no! Church people don't like people like me. I stopped going to church years ago." (Our daughter's) response was, "No! Our church is different." She convinced him to come. And you know what? Her proclaimed atheist, transgender friend came to church. He came to MPC*

[1] CDC. (2016). Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
[2] https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/leading_causes_of_death_by_age_group_2018-508.pdf
[3] Lytle, M. C., Blosnich, J. R., De Luca, S. M., & Brownson, C. (2018). Association of religiosity with sexual minority suicide ideation and attempt. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 54(5), 644– 651. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2018.01.019

and he LIKED it. He didn't feel unwanted. He didn't feel as though he was being shamed. He didn't feel like he was being cast out as a sinner. He felt welcome. He felt safe.

Becoming a More Light congregation is a way to ensure people in this community and watching online, know that MPC is a place where they can feel welcome. Where they can feel safe.

Some of you may be thinking, "Wow, Pastor Mark leaves and she goes right in on the LGBTQIA+ stuff." But the truth is he was far more likely to mention those letters than I was. When I came out, almost ten years ago now, I felt like there was a mostly unspoken contract between us that I wouldn't talk about it. And quite honestly, I was okay with that.

I just want to follow God's Call on my life. I want to preach and teach and provide congregational care and leadership. I want to enjoy my family and get my kid through high school and maybe get to the beach every once in a while.

But I can't take the easy way any more, because the youth of this congregation – our babies – and their friends are in danger. Ambiguity – or 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'- can be especially dangerous for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Some local churches claim to be welcoming, but engage in various forms of conversion therapy, whether it be the more official kind that is advertised on a local church's website and has been associated with a doubling of suicide attempts and has been condemned by the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Or whether it's the more stealth kind where they welcome someone into worship and then welcome them into a small group or Bible study, and there try to tell them that their partner of 20+ years is making them sin.

By becoming a More Light Presbyterian congregation we will show the logo on our website that means that when we say, "we welcome all" – ALL means all. And a logo is a little easier to find than knowing some Presbyterian church are welcoming, checking out our website, and finding my staff page that talks about my family (that's literally how someone figured out our church was welcoming and then started coming to our church recently).

I get it – we don't to only be about one thing – and we won't be unless that one thing is seeking to love God by loving and serving with all of God's people. More on that in the Matthew 25 sermon.

For some of us, it's hard to imagine this even being necessary. I went into ministry because I grew up in a church that I felt loved me no matter what – whether I wedged a Nerf football high up in the Fellowship Hall ceiling or pushed a (deserving) staff member in the pool – I was loved and embraced by the congregation.

Many of you are here because you've felt that way in other churches and here too. But not everyone has found sanctuary in a Sanctuary. There are those for whom the church has been a place of deep pain, and cruel judgment, of bitter rejection – made all the worse when a church that once embraced you, finds out who you really are – your authentic self - and then rejects you.

I know how much this hurts, because I myself am no longer welcome in the same church that taught me that God loves me no matter what.

Who is to be welcomed into the community of faith? The church has struggled with this since its very beginning – please note the *church* has struggled with this – God has not.

In our passage from Acts this morning, it's an angel of the Lord that tells Philip, a freshly minted disciple, to go to where he'll find the Ethiopian eunuch, a man that the church of the time considered unworthy and unwelcome.

And we know, in these cases, God is never the problem. It's us. It's the culture around us, it's the pressure we feel from family and friends, sometimes friends we've made in these very pews – as we live in the southcentral PA Bible belt.

I know you all feel it because I was in the stands at a Little League game a few years ago, and I had to leave to get back here for something. A parent I hadn't met before asked me what church I go to. I said, "Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church."
She visibly flinched and said in a hushed voice, "I hear one of their pastors is gay."

After those who knew me stopped gasping and giggling I said, "You should come by, she's a really great preacher."

It can all get confusing – or at the very least, muddled – because we have what we used to think and then we have what we know. We know what's right – God loves all. God welcomes all. But sometimes what others think and the norms of the culture around us can threaten to bump us off of God's path. It even happened to Jesus in the first passage we read.

Jesus leaves to hang out in a different region, maybe to catch his breath, who knows, and a woman – a non-Jew – begs him for help for her daughter. Jesus and his disciples consider her and her daughter unworthy – not welcome – to their faith. But she pushes on him and opens his eyes to God's welcome – even for her, maybe especially for her – and he ignores what his culture and the religious teachings he grew up with had taught him up to that point.

Sometimes opening our minds and our hearts to new things is hard. In the passage for Acts, the eunuch is trying to understand a writing from the prophet Isaiah. He's most likely not even reading it in his own primary language – so he is struggling to wrap his brain around a new thing.

When we're new to a language, the characters in front of us don't have meaning, they just look like alphabet soup, a scramble in front of us like: LGBTQIA+ for instance. Why so many letters?

I remember in seminary, as I was shifting away from my own wrongness about who is welcome by God and should be welcomed by the church, I told someone, "They have to stop adding letters! Every time I am in a place where I think I understand, they add more letters!"

And the pronouns… we get to just pick our own pronouns now?

Our look in on the story of the Ethiopian eunuch ends with them asking, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

The chariot stops, they get out, and Philip baptizes them.

When we baptize our babies and children here, we make a commitment, a promise, to love them and encourage them as they grow into who God has created them to be. This vow isn't dependent on them loving the people we think its okay for them to love, or on them agreeing with the gender they were assigned at birth.

I know us.
The parents who asked the Christian Education & Social Justice Committee and in turn the Session know us – MPC – More People Caring. That's why they have asked us to name our welcome out loud for the sake of not only our baptized babies and youth and loved ones – but for the sake of all babies and youth and loved ones.

I listed those bleak statistics in the beginning of the sermon, but here's another one - Research shows that it only takes one adult in the life of an LGBTQ youth who accepts them, for that suicide rate to drop by 40%.[4]

40% - 4.0.

Friends, if that is the impact of one affirming adult… Imagine what an entire church full of affirming adults can do.

There's a lot for us to learn together, and More Light Presbyterians has all kinds of resources for that too – but for now, focus on what you already know to be true:

God welcomes all… and the only label that matters is: Beloved Child of God.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[4] The Trevor Project. (2019). National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health. New York, New York: The Trevor Project.