I grew up in a town that was almost half Jewish, which means that in addition to having the Bar and Bat Mitzvah prayers memorized in perfect Hebrew long before I got to studying that language in seminary, I also grew up hearing stories about the holocaust from the families of my friends. Though I rarely heard first hand accounts from grandparents, I do remember anecdotes that profoundly shaped my sense of what it means to be a neighbor, a citizen, a person of integrity and courage. For example, there were a lot of tales about eastern European Christian families who got along well-enough with the Jews in their villages, but were still susceptible to the climate of anti-Semitism around them, so that when policies that affected their friends came in to play – like wearing identifiable clothing or forced relocations – they protested on behalf of “their Jew,” but not Jews more broadly. Some even went so far as to help Jewish friends hide or escape while still using their dollars, their power, their voices and their votes to support the Reich. Somehow their fondness for one person or one family, even the recognition of their particular humanity, wasn’t quite enough to change their worldview and their bias.

This never made any sense to me as a child. And while it still doesn’t make any sense to me as an adult, it’s something I’ve seen repeatedly, particularly after marrying a Muslim man from Pakistan in post 9/11 America. When the Muslim travel ban, deemed legal by the Supreme Court this past week, was first implemented in January of 2017, my mom called me, obviously upset, having just talked to someone in our extended family who came to my wedding, loves my husband, even sends him a card every year on his birthday, and who had just told her she agreed with the policy because Muslims hate America and have no right being here.

Now, before saying anything more, let me be very clear that there are a multiplicity of perspectives on immigration and other political issues that can be entirely in line with Christian ethics and values, and there are a near infinite number of ways of living into those policies in ways that are morally sound and deeply faithful. But when our policies and political perspectives are motivated by the belief that any particular group of people are essentially bad, corrupt, or undeserving of our compassion and care, they are, by definition, un-Christian and immoral, and
it takes more than knowing one person to shift those patterns of thought. Until the underlying racism, homophobia, misogyny, or other source of hatred or fear is exposed and addressed – which is, it turns out, much harder to do than we once thought – even the nice Jew or Muslim or Mexican down the street will always be just an exception to the rule, and the exception alone will not shift how we understand and experience the world around us. Real cultural change unfolds slowly, requiring tremendous energy to overcome inertia, with signs of progress only painstakingly coming into view.

It’s important for us to think about this, not only as educated, empowered people in our particular time and place, but as a Church, because for better and worse Christianity is a cornerstone of Western culture, declines in religious affiliation and increases in religious diversity notwithstanding. Christian assumptions about personhood, freedom, justice and family life inform not only the social fabric of this country but also our legal frameworks, and while we as Episcopalians might disagree with many of the things “Christianity” supposedly stands for, our faith is nevertheless invoked publicly and privately to justify all sorts of beliefs and behaviors.

So as I came to the scripture passages appointed for today, I was struck by how countercultural the Bible really is: how often what we might assume to be the Christian perspective is only a Christian perspective, or actually not very Christian at all. Today’s passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel speak to two important aspects of personhood relevant in ancient times and, once again, relevant today: sexuality and age. I don’t often think much about the title of my sermons, but if I had to give one today it would be The Bible: It’s Not What You Think.

For the last several weeks we have been hearing from the Books of Samuel, which, like the books of Kings and Chronicles, describe ancient Israel’s monarchy. A few weeks ago we heard about the anointing of Saul as the first, and highly controversial, King, and the following week of the appointment of David – the ruddy shepherd boy and son of Jesse - as his successor. Last week we heard of David’s slaying the giant Goliath with his bow, but the other option described the love affair between David and Saul’s son, Jonathan. That’s right – David, the mythic King David, the greatest king of ancient Israel. “The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David,” scripture tells us, “and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” So consuming was
this love that they made a covenant with each other by removing their clothing and other
belongings and giving them to each other.

Commentators who are squeamish about the prospect that David was gay try to explain
away these detailed verses, arguing that some nowhere else attested to non-romantic covenant is
being enacted - the ancient equivalent of a “bromance” – but doing so is pretty clearly an
imposition of their values onto the text, not the other way around. After all, as we heard today,
upon the death of Saul and Jonathan, David composed a lament, which says of Jonathan, “greatly
beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” I repeat -
*The Bible: It’s Not What You Think.*

How many times have we heard the book of Leviticus quoted out of context on the
question of human sexuality, and how few times has the love between David and Jonathan been
celebrated? How many people who marched in Pride parades all across the country last weekend
would related completely differently to the Church, their families, even themselves and their own
bodies, if this story were also a part of the Christian values that get invoked in the public square,
or at the dinner table? Not only does it demonstrate that the diversity of human sexualities is
nothing new, it also shows that one of the most favored and famous people in the whole Bible
was gay (or perhaps bi). And chosen of God. And beloved. So if David and Jonathan, Ruth and
Naomi, and the Ethiopian eunuch, were chosen, beloved, then their full humanity and the full
humanity of every person, no matter their sexuality or gender identity, can never be on the table
for Christians. The Episcopal Church has wrestled with this and come to affirm the full inclusion
of those identifying as LGBTQ within our communion, but our wider culture and the wider
Church have not yet shifted. Knowing these stories - celebrating these stories - is part of the
slow, faithful work of change.

Continuing on, today’s Gospel offers even more of the unexpected. When Jesus makes it
to the other side of the choppy Galilean Sea, a religious leader immediately greets him, begging
him to come save his daughter, who is near death. Jesus begins to journey with Jairus when a
woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years touches him and is instantly
healed. This woman would have been ritually impure – an outcast, an untouchable. Though it
seems she suffered from a physical impairment, her social isolation might parallel a prostitute’s
today, the rumors about her make her as much the subject of scandal as a woman who’d had a
notorious affair. And yet Jesus does not despise her. He recognizes her faith. He calls her daughter.

With all this commotion, though, by the time they draw near to Jairus’ home, news reaches them that the little girl has already died. Still, Jesus is confident that the same power that healed the woman will heal the girl; confident that he sees something no one else does (the girl is asleep, not dead) and he tells her to get up, and she does. There are a lot of stories in scripture about Jesus’ concern for children. He encourages us to be like children, he tells his disciples not to keep the children from him. And it seems to us almost sentimental: a celebration of the innocence we also see in children, an affirmation of their need for special protections, compassion, and encouragement. We have become so used to the idea that children require particular care that we forget that way of thinking is, actually, the result of a massive cultural shift, and that in Jesus’ time attitudes about children were very different then our own.

In *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, O.M. Bakke explores how the personhood of children emerged in the Church against the backdrop of an ancient world in which it was adulthood, not birth, that granted people the dignity, integrity, rights, and protections of being a human being. And so Jesus’ concern with the youngest members of his community was unusual, peculiar, odd.

We might wish to think of the question of the personhood of children as a given – like the full personhood of women, those identifying as LGBTQ, or Muslims – and perhaps for us personally this is true, but when we look at our society as a whole we see there is a lot more work yet to be done. We still struggle to adequately educate our children, particularly those most in need of high quality public schools; almost half a million children currently live in a stretched and over-burdened foster-care system; and children suffer from alarmingly high rates of abuse, neglect, and mental illness. “Your daughter is already dead,” the people to Jairus. It is too late.

But Jesus knows that it is never too late. Jesus shows us that God is so concerned with this vulnerable child, with vulnerable children, that even when it looks like all hope has been lost, when the child has already been taken, when she is at the gates of death or has been flown across the country or placed in a detention center or swallowed up by the justice system or is drowning in depression, that even then, God shows up, God acts, and God works for change. Even then, God can and does turn everything on its head. *The Bible: It’s Not What You Think.*
Our ideas of what scripture says, our ideas about who we are and who God is, are not inadequate only because of shortsighted or small-minded interpretations. The Bible is also not what we think because it is, essentially, a site of communication, and if God is still speaking through it then we should expect to be surprised every time we turn to even the most familiar of story, because God is in the business of turning our assumption on their heads, too. The Bible: it’s not what you think, because it’s where we turn to find out what God thinks, and God is reminding us today, here and now, that God’s love is broader, wider, stronger than anything we can imagine. That it includes everyone, consoles everyone, confronts everyone, and that everyone has a place in the story of God’s own life, even those traditionally left out, and yes, even us. Perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that God never stops showing up, even when God seems mightily tardy on our end and the timeline is incomprehensible, which means we, too, will keep showing up, to be agents of healing and compassion, to be witnesses to justice and mercy, as friends and advocates, visionaries and dreamers, speaking words of consolation, hope, and courage, perhaps especially when it looks like all hope has been lost. And when we do, we will not be alone.

“Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about. Amen.