

PLAYING FAVORITES

James 2.1-8

September 9, 2018, Homecoming

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

(Anthem: Lean On Me/Everlasting Arms, arr. Pepper Choplin)

“Lean on me when you’re not strong” as we are, together, that fellowship learning what it means to lean on those “everlasting arms.”

By the way, I first heard this mashup of “Lean on Me” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” was May of 2016. I know that because I had just been diagnosed with kidney cancer and I had written a letter that that I could read to various groups in the church and could send out to everyone. One of the first groups I read it to was the choir at the beginning of a Wednesday night rehearsal. It was hard. And do you know what the choir did? They sang: “lean on me when you’re not strong” as we are leaning on those everlasting arms.

I’m doing fine now but that was the sermon I needed to hear then. And maybe I should just stop there.

But I do have a couple things to say.

One is that leaning, for a lot of us, makes for nice lyrics but we have been taught something else. We’ve been taught to stand up straight; to stand on our own two feet; that it’s a bad thing to have to lean on anyone. And however much merit there might be in that advice, in its extreme, it feeds that individualism and that isolation that can cause a lot of psychological and social and spiritual damage. It’s no wonder there is all that loneliness in the world.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone say that self-sufficiency is an illusion that can be swept away in a minute. I can tell you that all it takes is a cancer diagnosis or a natural disaster or a loss or some deep

disappointment. And it's leaning that can save us. Macy and Johnstone say that it is the "networks of mutual support" that can save us and they have evidence, they say, that those networks "bring many benefits, including reduced crime rates, higher levels of trust, lower suicide rates, a reduced risk of heart attacks, fewer strokes, and less depression."

"A group we feel at home in," they say, "can support us through remarkable personal transformations. Our interactions change when we feel safe enough to let go of defensiveness, allowing us to become more open to one another and to life." A home like that can support the offering of our best contributions to the world. And they quote a colleague who says: "I had found a place where I could make a contribution simply by showing up, and showing care for those who had also showed up."

There you go. As I like to say: Never underestimate the power of showing up.

The thing about showing up is that there is never a guarantee about who else will show up along with you.

So, given the importance of community – given the urgency of networks of mutual support especially for folks who are living in diaspora, the scattered ones, the exiled and the expelled ones, the folks who have lost their sense of home – James writes ...

James 2.1-8 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

My sisters and brothers, your faith in our glorious Savior Jesus Christ must not allow favoritism. Suppose there should come into your assembly a person wearing gold rings and fine clothes and, at the same time, a poor person dressed in shabby clothes. Suppose further you were to take notice of the well-dressed one and say, "Sit right here, in the seat of honor"; and say to the poor one, "You can stand!" or "Sit over there by my footrest." Haven't you set yourselves up like judges who hand down corrupt decisions?

Listen, dear sisters and brothers: didn't God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom promised to those who love God? Yet you've treated poor people shamefully! Aren't rich people exploiting you? Aren't they the ones who haul you into the courts, and who blaspheme that noble Name by which you've been called?

You're acting rightly, however, if you fulfill the venerable law of the scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Now I know we throw this command around a lot – so much, in fact, I sometimes think it has lost any real meaning. But James has something particular in mind. Loving your neighbor as yourself is not showing favoritism. It's recognizing and moving beyond our privilege – that is, the right we feel we have to pass judgment on the value of another person - and our prejudice – that is, the choice we make to welcome or reject another person based on the value we ascribe to them.

James gives us very straightforward examples of this. A person shows up with all the signs of being wealthy and well-connected and we give that person respect. While another person shows up and has all the signs of being poor and without any obvious claim to power and we treat that person with disrespect.

To love someone is to value that person as a human being, regardless of our judgements about them.

One could ask whether showing the person who appears to be wealthy respect is really more about valuing that person's money and power than valuing the person herself.

In the liberation movements of Central and South America, there developed a theology called "God's preferential option for the poor." And however that strikes you, at the very least it is a good reminder that the people we favor and the ones God favors may not be exactly the

same people. It's the corollary to Anne Lamott's: "you can safely assume you have created God in your image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you hate."

Even if we say: Well, of course, God has no favorites. We are too often like those children who badger their parents with the question about who, of all their sisters and brothers, is the favorite.

Several years ago, my sister gave me a shirt that says: "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite."

It was a joke but I have always wondered if it was one of those Freudian things because my sister always suspected that I was the favorite child. I was happy to argue with her about that and to offer evidence.

My point is: Is playing favorites just a fact of life?

I would be lying if I said there were no favorite people in my life or that I have never said: Well, you know, so-and-so is not one of my favorite people.

And it has become abundantly clear to me that framing justice as a matter of not playing favorites is big lie. The argument anti-affirmative action folks make is that policies that ensure women and people of color are fairly represented in schools and in contracts and in the workforce are unfair because they are playing favorites.

A couple years ago this state passed Initiative 200 that made that very case and when it won, it effectively gutted affirmative action programs in this state. You can read the statistics but suffice to say that initiative has had a huge negative impact on women and people of color. It turns out that not playing favorites means folks like me are favored to win.

There is an initiative right now – I-1000 – that will correct that mistake. But if "not playing favorites" means that systems of injustice and

discrimination are being given a free hand to continue decades of a system that favors white folks, then we need to pay better attention to what favoritism – and not playing favorites - means.

James says that the community that is trying to follow the way of Jesus is one where loving one's neighbor isn't some nebulous platitude. It means paying attention to how we use privilege to discriminate against the poor and powerless.

It means valuing people as human beings regardless of our judgements about them or, for that matter, regardless of the judgements people make about themselves. One of the great works of the civil rights movement was to get people of color to stop believing themselves to be powerless. One of the most difficult things I have to do is to help lesbian and gay people quit believing that, because of their sexual orientation, they are sinners rejected by God. Loving your neighbor sometimes means valuing people as human beings regardless of the judgements they make about themselves.

Simply put, James says, loving our neighbors has everything to do with how we welcome the people who show up in our lives.

And we have some history with that.

For almost 150 years people have been showing up in this neighborhood from all over this country and all over the world. And this congregation has done its best – no matter how haltingly and imperfectly – to find ways to say: Welcome home.

When Chinese immigrants arrived here and were being harassed, this congregation found ways to say: Welcome home.

After World War II and the internment of Japanese-Americans, one of our Seattle newspapers wrote that “we must form posses to turn the

[Japanese-Americans] back at the city limits.” And our pastor, Dr. Harold Jensen, stood in this pulpit, and said: Welcome home.

When people are exiled from their families and expelled from their churches because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, this congregation says: Welcome home.

When individuals and families are seeking asylum and immigrants are trying to make a new start, we need to find ways that we can say: Welcome home.

When people are experiencing homelessness of body and soul, we try to find ways to say: Welcome home.

When that cancer diagnosis came out of the blue and I was feeling pretty lost, this congregation taught me what it means to lean. And when I got back to work you said: Welcome home.

When we say that we know that the universal law is to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have something particular in mind: Welcome home.

So when it came time to choose music that we would sing regularly as a reminder of who we are, we chose “Bring Us Home” and “God of Grace and God of Glory” and this hymn, “All Are Welcome.” And I admit that we don’t always get it right. We fail. We fall into playing favorites. We forget why we are here.

But we keep singing it anyway because this is the vision to which we hold ourselves accountable. This is our hope. This is the promise we have to offer those who show up in our lives – that, “When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment,” as Dr. King says, “when we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is Someone who loves us,

cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.” Someone who will say: Welcome home.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012), pp.125-128. The quote from Anne Lamott is in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing ad Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p.22. The story about Dr. Jensen is in *Our First Baptist Heritage*, p.111. Dr. King's words are from his sermon, "A tough mind and a tender heart," *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), p. 20.