

Lowly and Lofty

Sunday, September 6, 2015; Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, 14-17

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I have heard it said often that God has a preference for the poor, the lonely, and the lowly. Today's scripture reading from the Book of Psalms emphasizes God's concern for these as God sets prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over strangers, and upholds the orphan and widow (Psalm 149:7-9). But does God have a preference for the lowly? Yes...and no. God has a preference for the lowly and also for the lofty, for God favors all of God's children.

In Jesus' Parable of the Lost Sheep, we are told that a good shepherd will leave the faithful, gathered flock when one of the sheep has become lost and is in need of rescue, and that once that lost sheep has been found and has been returned to the flock, there is great celebration (Matthew 18:12-13; Luke 15:4-7). The shepherd still loves the blessed sheep that happily graze together while demonstrating an active love for the little wanderer, focusing on the needs of the lowly, lost creature so that it too can be lifted up by returning to the flock. The parable teaches us about God's preference for all: The Creator cares for the whole flock, even those who are lowly or have gone astray, and will work to lift up the lowly and find and gather up the lost.

Our second reading from the Letter of James reminds us that it is not God who demonstrates a preference for one person over another, but that God's children do favor some of their siblings while disregarding others. James calls his flock to demonstrate a godlike, active respect for the lowly among them, honoring them by seeing and treating them as equals. We are called to follow this path, the path of our loving Creator, Parent of all people, in favoring all of God's children.

The scripture also calls for our concern for all be one based on action, not just well-wishes. Can you imagine if we went down to Norwalk's homeless shelter and simply handed out to the hungry people gathered there cheery, glittery greeting cards that said, "I hope you get some food today!" That would not only be worthless, but shamefully disrespectful to the plight of our needy brothers and sisters. A paper wish will not lift up these hungry people; a real bite of meatloaf will. And so we provide some real help for these people when we go beyond thinking about the problem of homelessness and hoping for some lasting solution by the act of providing food.

Actively caring for the lowly in such a way is not natural in our society. We learned in last Sunday's scripture reading and sermons that one of the aspects of the Roman way of being that James saw as filthy, wordly, ungodly pollution was its system of overpowering and disempowering, conquering and oppressing, all for its own enrichment. This system of becoming the loftiest by defeating or holding down lowly others became the way of those in Europe who would follow the Roman Empire, and it remains as the dominant way of the West, including our own way.

We love to win. And we love a winner. Right now, in the US Open tennis tournament, we are privileged to witness the amazing, lofty play of one of the greatest athletes in history, Serena Williams, as she dominates the sport as she has done for many years. We love a champion who rises up and dominates as she has done. We aspire to be so lofty and we teach our children to do the same, and so we privilege the victorious and the dominant and raise up these already lofty people to god-like status, celebrating the success of our celebrities and our champions.

And as we gaze at these bright, lofty stars, the lowly – those defeated by life or simply those born on the wrong side of the tracks or on the wrong continent – are far from being at the center

of our attention. Often, when they do come into view, we think negatively about them: They are losers, deficient, or “have done this to themselves,” and so deserve to be lowly. But this is not how the Good Shepherd sees them. They are beloved sheep, maybe not as fat and happy as those of us obliviously grazing away in our rich pastures, but equally loved by God. They should be equally loved and honored by us, their fellow sheep, as well.

Should we be so loving and respectful of all of our fellow children of God, raising all up, we will be true champions. Will the lowly of the world find such a champion in us gathered here this morning at Wilton Congregational Church? Will we actively care for all of God’s children, or just the winners or those who are like us?

Will we care for the untold thousands of refugees streaming into Europe from the war-torn lands of the Middle East? Will we care for the untold millions yet to be born in those lands by helping to create lasting peace there? Will we think of and treat our Muslim sisters and brothers as fellow children of God and equal recipients of God’s grace or as enemies to be conquered, subdued, and exploited?

And what of the lowly in our own nation? Do we care about justice for all in Kentucky as well as in Connecticut, or in our Fergusons as well as in our Fairfield Counties? Do we care about the homeless and hungry in Norwalk, Bridgeport, and Danbury? Do we care about the lonely elders in our own neighborhoods?

One of the reasons why I love this church and the UCC is that we do care. We pray for the lowly, but we also act to lift up the lowly. When we give to support Our Church’s Wider Mission or to local organizations that bring help, healing, and hope to people, we act to lift up the lowly. When we work at Habitat for Humanity (join us on Saturday morning at eight) or for a community in Maine (join us on Saturday at five as we remember and celebrate our

summer youth mission trip), we act to lift up the lowly. When each of us each day work and give in ways that help others, we act to lift up the lowly. Let us be renewed in our commitment to care for all of creation by preferring to lift the lowly, that all of God's sheep may graze in peace and be blessed. Amen.