

Faith United Church of Christ Online Worship



Faith Church drawn by Deanne Carroll

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
The Nineteenth Sunday of Online Worship
Joint Service with Lyndhurst Community Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2020
10:00 a.m.

Privilege and Pleasing God

“It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.” – 1 Kings 3:10

Gene McAfee

One of the hymns that the editors of *The New Century Hymnal* included that makes that hymnal genuinely inclusive is “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” which is very familiar to those of us who grew up singing gospel as well as classical hymns:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!

I’ve been reflecting a good deal on that second line in this well-loved hymn these days, when we’re hearing so much about privilege, specifically white privilege, and when the talk is almost entirely negative. I don’t think it has to be. Privilege isn’t always negative; the old gospel hymn told me otherwise when I was a child, and I believe our first reading from the book of Kings echoes that sentiment.

Privilege can be a positive asset to a life well pleasing to God. I say that on the basis of my text, Solomon’s prayer for a discerning mind to govern God’s people. Solomon was one of the most privileged people on earth, and he prayed to use that privilege wisely, and the text says that “it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.” Privilege, used wisely, is a tool for building a life of blessing for everyone, that life that Abraham and Sarah and all of their descendants were called to.

I learned this lesson many years ago, when I worked at a camp for handicapped people. Most of our campers were children and most were physically handicapped. Their limbs didn’t move smoothly or gracefully or in some cases at all. Some were deaf, some were blind, some were destined to a premature death because of genetic abnormalities. It was all very unfair, and we did the best we could to try to right what God had appeared to make wrong. The question we lived with, day in and day out, was the same that drives the story of Job that our friends from LCPC have been studying – who deserves this kind of treatment? The short answer is that no one does.

There is no answer to the question of life’s unfairness. Job’s three friends, as Pastor Francis pointed out last week, did their best work when they showed up and said nothing. As soon as they started talking, things began to go downhill. The prevailing theology of the day said that suffering was punishment for sin; ergo, if Job is suffering, Job must have sinned. That’s an idea that’s as invasive and persistent in theological thought as Rose of Sharon is in my back yard. It crops up again, famously, in John 9, when the disciples ask Jesus of a man born blind, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?”

At Camp Koch, we didn’t ask who sinned, and we probably would have punched anyone in the nose who suggested that our campers’ handicaps were punishment for sin, theirs or their parents’. Stuff happens, and we don’t know why, and the best we can do is to make the best of it. That’s about as theologically sophisticated as you can get when it comes to suffering, and maintain some kind of intellectual and moral integrity.

And that’s what we did at Camp – we made the best of it, whatever it happened to be: deafness, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, an amputation, a missing limb – it didn’t matter. We made the best of it. We did our best to level the playing field. We thought creatively

about accommodations. Those of us who were counselors were in the privileged position of being able to help our campers, for two weeks each summer, experience the world in ways that they otherwise did not get to experience it, and most of us recognized that ability for what it was – a privilege.

Solomon hadn't asked to be born into privilege. And he certainly didn't always use that privilege well. But here, at the start of his reign, Solomon has the good sense – the very wisdom that he prayed for – to pray for the ability to use his privilege well. He didn't ask for the things kings typically request – long life, riches, and the life of his enemies – but he asked instead for the one thing most needed in an effective ruler. He asked God to give him the one thing, above all else, that would help him use his position of privilege to serve others, and “it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.”

Privilege, as we've been hearing it talked about lately, is part of our sinful, fallen world, and we believers have always been tasked with trying to make the best of the less than ideal situation that we call history. I believe we live further into our calling by asking for the same thing that Solomon prayed for: the wisdom to exercise our privilege in the service of others. I believe it is possible to please God by exercising privilege in the right way, because privilege is a form of power, and we are called to use all our powers, including privilege, in God's service: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Mark 12:30). Privilege is buried in that word strength.

Some things we'll be able to fix in our lifetimes, perhaps, and some things we won't. I can't change the way people react to the color of my skin, for better or for worse. I can't change the fact that some people will treat me better because I'm male rather than female. I can't change the fact that I can go anywhere in the world and find someone who speaks my native tongue. I can't change any of those realities that accrue to my advantage. They're part of that knapsack of privileges that Professor Peggy McIntosh described in her famous article that got us widely thinking and talking about privilege.

What I can do, however, is use those various privileges in ways that build up rather than tear down, that enlarge safe spaces rather than constrict them, that distribute resources rather than concentrate them. The question for every generation is whether that's what we'll do with our privileges – our white privilege, our male privilege, our straight privilege, our American privilege, our middle-class privilege, or our educated privilege.

Jill Dugovics and I were talking about privilege not long ago, and I confessed to her that I believe the writers and actors who produced the sitcom “Will and Grace” did more to advance justice for LGBTQ+ folks than all of us preachers put together. The folks who used their privileged celebrity status to help us laugh at ourselves, think about ourselves, and face some difficult truths about ourselves showed us how you can put privilege to work to help make the world a less polarized and unfair and unhappy place.

Solomon had it easy compared to most of us: he was keenly aware of his privilege. Sadly, many of us are oblivious to our privilege. We consider our privileged place in the world

“normal,” which means invisible and not worth talking about or thinking about. And that’s one of the most difficult aspects of privilege: most of us don’t think about it or talk about it, and some of us get really, really defensive when someone else brings it up.

But there’s no reason for us to be defensive about our various privileges if we’re willing to follow the lead of Scripture, as I always advise you to do. Let the example of Solomon inform our thinking and acting about privilege. Solomon wasn’t perfect but he was wise, and you don’t need to be a king in a palace with a thousand wives and concubines to possess wisdom. Wisdom is available to everyone who asks for it, and we could all use a large dose of wisdom right now, not just in our leadership, but especially in our followership. You and I are the ones who need to pray for biblical wisdom, to help us see the world as God sees it – with all of its complexity, privileges, blessings, struggles, faults, and tragedies – and then to use our privileges to please God and serve our neighbor. Privilege doesn’t have to be a dirty word.

And if Solomon, with all his splendor and wisdom seems a bit beyond our grasp, then look to the example of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith who, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (2:6-7). Those of us who are clinging to our privileges, fearful of losing them, have another option, the example of someone who, like Solomon, knew how to use his unique privilege to please God and serve the world. “Therefore,” Paul went on, “God has highly exalted him, giving him the name that is above every name” (v. 9). That’s what God does to show us how to handle privilege.