



A NOTE FROM PASTOR JOANNA

The Columns | April 2023

On my laptop, I have a sticker that quotes the Haitian proverb: "***The Neighborhood is the Family.***" I'm blessed to say it's a dream-come-true for me. The house to the North holds a family with kids the same age as ours. They are dear, trusted friends. Across the street, the three older kids are excellent role models, friends, and babysitters, and their parents inspire us. The house to the South is home to two sisters. One travels for work and the other is disabled. We check in and help out, especially when the working sister is traveling. I text them when there's a storm; they make us muffins.

Our street is having a baby boom. Our kids meet babies before we do and they teach the toddlers to run. Renters come and go, but they're our neighbors—our siblings—while they're here. Younger neighbors help older neighbors rake leaves. We search for lost cats together, and we worry if we don't see someone for a while. We depend on each other.

Thanks be to God, our neighborhood is our family. We also have our church family, our family-family, and our friend-family near and far. Interconnected relationship is where roots grow. We learn to navigate conflict and grief, we celebrate and laugh, and we witness a world that is bigger than us.

With that in mind, here's another proverb I know to be true: "***There's no such thing as other people's children.***" When I moved to Ohio in 2018, the family separation policy was at the top of the news. An image was everywhere of a two-year-old Honduran asylum seeker, crying as her mother is searched and detained near the US-Mexico border. She's wearing a pink shirt, jeggings, and pink sandals. I remember a moment in which that picture came across my newsfeed, and when I looked up from my phone, there was my two-year-old Suzie giggling in my brother's driveway in a pink shirt, jeggings, and pink sandals. They were the same little girl—my little girls and yours.

Last Monday, we had another school shooting. Three adults and three nine-year-olds, like my nine-year-old, were killed. They were Evelyn, William, and Hallie. Evelyn: like my daughter Evelyn. William: like my nephew William. We have other school-aged Evelyns and Williams at LCC. We have nine year olds. We have educators and school employees. We have an obligation to keep them safe, because they're our children—mine and yours.

On Saturday night (3/25), there was an attempted arson at the Community Church of Chesterland, an Open and Affirming congregation in the Living Water Association of the United Church of Christ, just like Lakewood Congregational Church. The church and their pastor were targeted and received ongoing threats as they prepared for events in celebration of the Transgender Day of Visibility on March 31st.

On Sunday (3/26), before knowing about the hate crime at our sibling-church 40 minutes away, I prayed and preached in unabashed support of our transgender siblings, who so beautifully reflect the Image of God. At LCC we know and are in covenant with people impacted by the Anti-Trans and Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that is being introduced across our nation: members and attendees of our church, young and old. They are not other people's siblings; they're ours.

In Holy Week, we walk with Jesus who challenged the oppressive Roman Empire. He flipped the tables on a society that perpetuated systems built on money and power while pushing the poor and disempowered out to the margins. Jesus showed us how to pay attention to suffering, scarcity, and trauma, and to create spaces of love and belonging without fear. He walked the lonesome valley through persecution and a violent death while proclaiming "we belong to each other" and "love always wins."

Sometimes we may feel trapped in Holy Week. Violence, oppression, loneliness, suffering, and fear is woven through our world. There are days that feel like Good Friday and Holy Saturday, spent grieving Christ's death and wondering if the light will ever shine through. Family, Jesus didn't proclaim a hopeless story, so we don't either.

Here's the Good News: Love prevails. If we walk with Jesus through death, we rise with him in Resurrection. If the neighborhood is the family in suffering, the neighborhood is the family in rejoicing. If there's no such thing as other people's children, we're never without the joy of new life and generative connection.

Last week, alongside news of school shootings, church arsons, and dehumanizing policies, our church family showed up for each other as always. Children laughed in our hallways, our bell choir led us in singing "One Bread, One Body," we visited each other at the hospital, babysat each other's babies, and applauded for children and youth who brought Beauty and the Beast to life on stage, backstage, and in the pit orchestra. On Tuesday Rev. Catherine and Peggi Mizen gathered to provide insight about healthcare, and on Thursday my chat group shared stories with vulnerability and laughter. *The neighborhood is the family* each week when we host AA meetings, Cleveland Pride Band rehearsal, our Haynes Nursery School pre-schoolers, and sacred conversations.

In all of this faithful, covenantal community, we embody the Good News of the Resurrection. Christ rises again every time we tend to each other and build relationships. We rise with him, because we belong to each other and because love always wins. Where, O Death, is thy sting? To God be the Glory. 