

Isaiah 58: 1-12

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Rev. Jamie Green

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The Congregational Church of Needham

I honestly don't know what to say to all of you this morning. Starting to write this sermon was one of the hardest things I've done in quite a while. I wanted to preach a sermon about the legacy of social justice leaders both past and present who have done great things to change the world. But every time I came up with another idea for the sermon I kept asking myself why. What's the point? What's the point of a sermon?

Why should I tell you a story about Edwin Canil, a man in Guatemala who is fighting for equal rights and justice by trying to get former dictator Efraim Rios Montt charged with genocide crimes? Edwin is a legal advisor who helped find witnesses to testify in the genocide trial, which resulted in a historic conviction on May 10. Judges determined that genocide was committed against the Mayan people. Unfortunately, that sentence has since been annulled due to procedural errors. Despite this setback, the process has been HUGE for the cause of equality and human rights, thanks to Edwin getting brave survivors to speak up at the trial.

While speaking with Ali, Edwin's wife and a former member of this church, about Edwin's work, images of the Rwandan genocide came to mind. Maybe I could tell you the story of Paul whose life was portrayed in the movie Hotel Rwanda? He rescued over 1000 men, women and children from the genocide by hiding them in his hotel. But why? What difference would it make?

Why would I talk about brave people in Germany who did hid Jews in their homes during the Holocaust or people like Mother Teresa who gave up everything to help poor orphans in India?

Why would I even tell stories about Jesus whose radical politics, unconditional love, and inclusion of all people got him murdered? What's the point?

Would the lives and history of any of these people actually inspire any of us to change the world? I want my sermons to help change the world. But what do I even know? I'm only a 29-year-old girl, inundated with the hurt and pain and suffering and killing all over the world. I hear these stories on NPR two hours a day during my commute from Gloucester, but I don't feel inspired to change. I just end up feeling defeated. There is so much work that needs to be done in the world. How can anything I ever do or say make any kind of difference?

I sometimes get so overwhelmed by the amount of work needed to be done in the world. I get even more overwhelmed when I hear about these amazing people like Edwin and Paul doing amazing things and risking everything, even their lives, to do something great for the world. I feel like I can never live up to that for many reasons. I'm overwhelmed by all the things I could be doing but am not. I'm overwhelmed by all the fears I have. I'm overwhelmed by all of my personal wants and desires that conflict with all of my wants and desires for the world.

When all these thoughts swarm around in my head, I practically get a panic attack. So then I take a step back, and breathe, and try to figure out something that I can do, something that we can do to change the world... to leave a legacy of social justice. And this is what I've come up with it. It actually came to me in yoga class this week.

We can first work on changing ourselves. Philosopher Howard Thurman wrote, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

You know when you're on an airplane and the flight attendants go through the safety procedures and they say you should help yourself with the oxygen mask before you help others? I think it's the same with love. Jesus said love your neighbor as yourself. We so often focus on the love of neighbor part but completely neglect the love of self. But trust me, this is hard work. Loving and caring for myself is something I've been working on my entire life. A practice I did in yoga this week was breathing in something I need that will benefit me, and breathing out something I do not need that does not benefit me.

Maybe there is forgiveness, acceptance, confidence, wholeness that we need. Maybe there is anger, irritation, jealousy, pain, guilt, judgment inside of us that we need to let go of.

It is so important to be attuned to who you really are in body mind and spirit. This practice can change you, transform you. You can drink in the possibility of being who and what you really are.

I want to briefly practice this breathing exercise with you this morning. It has been immensely beneficial for me, and maybe it will be for you, too.

Start by closing your eyes. Try to get as comfortable as you can in your seat. Place your hands palms up on your knees. Take in a deep, slow breath through your nose. Feel the breath fill your diaphragm, your lungs, all the way up to your collarbone. Now exhale even more slowly. Try to get your exhale to be longer than your inhale.

This is signal for your body to relax. Keep breathing deeply and slowly in and out. Relax anything in your body that you are clenching. Relax your eyebrows, your jaw, roll your shoulders down your back. Keep breathing. Now start to focus on something you need as you breathe in. Breathe in love for yourself, breathe in forgiveness, breathe in acceptance, breathe in something that will benefit you. Now breathe out something you do not need. Breathe out guilt, judgment, anger, jealousy. Let it all go. Breathe in and breathe out with these intentions. Each breath is an opportunity for a new beginning. (breathe for a minute or two). Start to come back to the room, wiggle your fingers and toes, and open your eyes. This is step one. Loving ourselves.

Step two- baby steps to love the world. We can let every little thing we do and say be an expression of the beauty, peace and love in our hearts that we have cultivated from something as simple as a breathing exercise.

We don't need to pick up a newspaper or listen to NPR to know there are people suffering all around us. Some of us even sitting here today are hurting and broken. Some of us know people in our families, our neighborhood, our communities.. people living just down the street from us who are in need. I have to believe that even something as small and seemingly insignificant as a smile can make a huge difference. Sometimes I think I get caught up in wanting to leave a big, dramatic Dr.King-like legacy so much that I forget to do little things that could potentially be leaving a legacy in the lives of people around me. Sometimes I forget that I may be leaving a legacy that I don't even know about. Small steps I've taken, tiny things I've done, seemingly insignificant words I've said, that have made a difference in someone. And the reason I know this to be true is because of the small things that many people have done in my life that have saved me. Instead of telling you stories of the great lives of people like Edwin, Paul, and even Jesus, and then fearing never being able to live up to that legacy, I want to tell you a little bit of my story, about a few special people who have left amazing legacies that can be seen in my life.

1. Mrs Pearson, third grade teacher. I was a big girl in school and kids made fun of me. I was left out of most peer groups, especially on the playground during recess. Unlike most kids, recess was my least favorite part of the day. I dreaded going out to that playground and having no one to play with. Mrs. Pearson picked up on that, and asked me to be her special helper during recess. I erased the chalkboard, graded papers, and did all sorts of odds and ends for her. I felt needed, and cared for, and loved by this gesture... she really saved my life in 3rd grade and I will never forget her. But all she did was have me be her helper. Such a small easy action that had huge positive results.
2. Ms Kremer, my high school AP psychology teacher. My brother died when I was in high school and I had to miss about a week of school. When I got back to class, Ms. Kremer handed me a card full of signatures from everyone in the class, saying things like they loved me, and were thinking of me, and hoped I would be okay. It was really very touching to have a card signed by a bunch of high schoolers...

it really did make me feel loved and cared for in that difficult time. I still have that card, and I still remember Ms. Kremer and her thoughtfulness. What a small, seemingly insignificant thing to do... but it meant the world to me.

3. Mr and Mrs Showers, neighbors. When I was a kid, I really wanted to go to church but my parents didn't want me to, and wouldn't take me. So every Sunday, Mr. and Mrs. Showers would drive me to church. Every Sunday for 8 years, until I could drive myself. Being a part of that church family was incredibly important in my young broken life, and I would have never felt the love, acceptance, and guidance at church had Mr. and Mrs. Showers not driven me there. It was a fairly easy thing to do, but boy did it make a huge difference in my life.

Small steps, tiny gestures of love, that spiral into great change around the world. We just have to have faith that the one life we touch for good will touch another life and that in turn another, until who knows in what far place our touch will be felt.

I don't know what to say that will end genocides. I don't know what to say that will bring peace to the Middle East. I don't know what to say to you that will end hunger in Africa. But I do know that we have got to start caring for each other. We may not be able to be make great big changes in the world like Edwin, Paul, and Jesus. But I bet we can all be more like Mrs. Pearson, Ms. Kremer, and Mr and Mrs. Showers. We can be more like Isaiah said... not just loving and caring during worship on Sunday, but every day of the week. We can worship by not quarreling, but by helping those in need.

Like Isaiah said, we can start with our own flesh and blood. Maybe there's an estranged member of your family who needs forgiveness and acceptance and love.

Maybe the next time we are at the grocery store and we've waiting in a huge line and we are very impatient and we get to the cashier and she's not very good, maybe we can have gratitude for her and empathy for the life that she also has, and maybe not yell or be grumpy, but instead pass on a smile.

Maybe the next time you are on the phone with a customer service representative (like I have been this week trying to get internet at my new apartment) we can be friendly, nice, patient... we can see the humanity in them... we can see that they have a family too, and problems and worries and troubles too, that they are working this job to put food on their table and it's not their fault my internet's not working! And if we mess up, and yell or get angry or act impatient, we can take a deep breath, and try again next time. We can't give up if we make a mistake. But we can breathe, and have a new beginning, and keep trying.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain. If I can ease one life the aching, or cool one pain, or help one fainting robin into his next again, I shall not live in vain."

Whether we leave legacies like Edwin, Paul, or my third grade teacher, I hope that we can all leave a legacy of love, kindness, peace and justice in whatever ways we can. Amen.

Benediction:

May each step we take and every breath be an opportunity for a new beginning. And may God, the breath of life, go with you- above you to watch over you, beside you to comfort you, and before you to show you the way. Amen.