

February 9th, 2014

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-16

“Change Begins With One”

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page

[This sermon began with slides showing facts and images from news stories around the world: the threat of starvation in the Syrian civil war, children kidnapped in India to then work in factor or domestic labor, 16.7 million American children struggle with hunger; the growing poverty level in west central Wisconsin. These images were viewed as quiet piano music played in the background.]

I don't know about you, but I get overwhelmed looking at those statistics. Taking in the dire state of affairs in our world, our nation, our community and our personal lives can be overwhelming.

Technology is great but technology and our 24 hour news cycle not only tell us, but show us what is happening in our world: every tsunami, on-going wars, child trafficking. To compound that, there is personal tragedy that you hear about: a neighbor's affair has led to a divorce, parents who've had to grieve the death of one of their children. For me as a pastor, every day is different because there are needs that come into our office. New episodes of cancer, a family tragedy, people seeking financial help.

Taking in all these factors... what can you do? You can't solve any of it. You can't ignore it. You can't pretend it's not there. Today, we're going to look at a section of scripture that speaks about what we can do, I'll share with you a mantra I learned a while back and then I'm going to end with a story. We began with a somber tone but will end on a happier one.

Isaiah was one of God's prophets, commissioned to preach God's word and lead people in how they lived in their relationship to God and to each other. He saw how people were going about the motions of worshipping God and once worship was over... returned to selfish, divisive ways and particularly not caring for those in need. In today's passage, we learn of God's frustration over the people.

People then would fast as a means to worship God. God said: “Why do you fast, but you do not see? Look, you fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” God was saying, “Is this what I ask of you? Worship to make yourselves feel better or look better in the eyes of others? The world is already broken and you're making it worse!”

Isaiah then shares what God asks of his people, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?” God's saying, “To love me, love and serve those in need.

God then says, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” Just like when the suns come over the horizon to break the darkness of night, acts of serving others will bring about a light to break whatever darkness is present.

In the words today from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers to that light. These words are at the beginning of his ministry. He's just called the first disciples, a crowd is gathered around him and he's teaching on a mountain. He's speaking about his followers being salt and light...using imagery to speak a truth that is easy to remember. This one statement is key: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven."

The mantra I'd like to share with you that sums up these words from Isaiah and Jesus is this: Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone. There are two reasons why I love this phrase. One, if people ask you what the sermon was about today: you can sum it up in one sentence. Second, it flies in to the face of another mantra many of us heard growing up as a kid. You may have heard this phrase hundreds of times when you were younger and it made you mad. Now that you're an adult, you may say it.

You went up to one of your teachers, "can I do such and such?": If let you do it, then I have to let everyone do it. You went home, mom, dad can I have a cookie: If I give you one cookie, then I have to give one to your brother and sister.

When you heard that, perhaps you thought like me, "No you don't. Just give me a cookie." I wish I would have also said, "If I don't tell my sister, you don't tell her. It's a win, win." You don't have to do it for everyone, just do it for me. As adults, we need to be aware to not let that way of thinking hinder how we live out our responsibility as Christians. We can't let ourselves be overwhelmed and live by the excuse in that if we can't do for everyone, we do for no one.

The question God's word leads us to ask today is: who's your one? Who will be that person in your life who is in need...whatever that need may be? Perhaps a friend who is lonely, an organization in need of volunteer to help children and adults in need, a tired co-worker in need of a positive word.

There's three simple things we can do in helping 'the one': Go deep rather than wide. Going wide is easy...I'll give you \$10 I'll give you \$10; I'll pray for the plight of those in Syria. Going deep is harder since that's where you find a narrow, specific way to help and you go for it.

Second, go long-term rather than short-term. This is a commitment. Short-time is great but it's benefit is short as well. It's not that you're creating unhealthy co-dependency, you're helping in a sustaining way.

Finally, this is a challenge for many Americans...go for time, not only money. Rich Americans love to give money to everything since we're busy and that's easier to do. Being generous with your hard-earned dollars is a blessing. But don't let the money excuse get in the way of sharing your time. Sharing your time allows God's presence to be present in the lives of those you help as well as in your own life.

I'd like to share with you how these three notions and the mantra, do for one what you can do for everyone was made real for me. Well, not only for me, but for my wife and our kids

Since Trinity has the second largest food pantry in our area, many people with many needs come into our building. Three years ago, a man named Silas came to our office asking to talk with a pastor. I was

available so I talked with him in my office. He was bare foot; wearing old, dirty looking clothes and had two bags of food from our pantry. I assumed he was going to ask for something...a gas card, money for a hotel, or whatever. He had been homeless for about 8 years. He simply wanted to say thank you for the food. He'd stop by once in a while to say 'hi' and update me on how he was doing.

One winter evening just as I was getting ready to leave the office, Silas stopped in. He looked down. He told me that some of his things had been taken and whatever food he had was gone. He said something along the lines, "I don't have much of anything now I don't have nothing." You'd feel the same way I did, just heart-broken.

I told him to wait in the hallway and that I'd be back. It was around dinner time and I asked my wife to make an extra plate for me to take back to church. Why? "Silas had most of his stuff taken." She knew about Silas and dished up a plate, dessert, and a couple cans of soda. I grabbed some extra soap, shampoo and towels.

Our son Ben came to meet Silas that night. He sat next to Silas as we watched Veggie Tales in the youth room. Silas later said, "You have no idea how nice it is to be sitting here with you guys." Our son, Ben, then asked him "Did you eat the cookies yet?" We laughed and simply sat.

When he was finished and the show was done, I drove him downtown to the Green Tree Inn and paid for him to stay there for the night. I gave him an old coat, hat, gloves and a couple sweatshirts. This was before the Sojourner House, the homeless shelter down town was built. Silas comes and goes and that's the way it is with him.

I share that story not for any accolades. All of you have helped people in the past. It's simply by helping one, that somehow, some way, the darkness of our world is replaced by a glimmer of light. Light that there is compassion in our midst even when the world seems overwhelming with bad news. That compassion is first for you since out of God's love, you were the one for whom Jesus died on a cross, that you would be forgiven and given a hopeful future.

Empowered by the light of Jesus Christ's resurrection that broke into our darkened world, be aware of 'the one' who next steps into your life. It is then that you can quite simply bring the light of God's presence and love into an overwhelming world. It is then, that you can change our world for the better, one person at a time. Amen.

