

The Power of One

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There are literally 100's of self- help books written each year, not to mention the thousands already on library shelves that cover every possible situation or circumstance in our lives that we may be struggling with. I am grateful for the psychologist and psychiatrists, doctors and others who are doing research and take the time to write such books. As a parent I have read 20 or more parenting books alone. In biblical times there were no such books. The people relied on their intuition, on each other, help from judges like Deborah who would listen to them and help them settle disputes, and they relied on the stories of their ancestors that had been passed down from generation to generation to help them navigate the difficult times in their lives. These stories were eventually written down and now is what we hold in our hands, the bible. Thanks be to God for those scribes who long ago painstakingly wrote these stories down and for the translators who have translated these scriptures into languages we can all read. It is amazing to me how these stories about a particular people, in a particular place, 1000's of years ago could have just as easily been written about us. So many of the same problems they encountered still exist today. Yes, we have evolved in many ways, but so much more remains the same. The book of Isaiah could be a best-selling self- help book. Isaiah is like that wise older friend or teacher who can speak truth into your life in a way that you can hear it. He doesn't sugar coat the truth but he is also not brutal. He is that perfect combination of corrective and affirming. Isaiah basically says, Here's the problem, here's the plan, stick to the plan and this will result.

In the book of Isaiah we see over and over again the people of Israel turning away from God, the consequences of their choices and a God who holds them accountable but also never gives up on them, extends forgiveness and a path to reconciliation, and freedom. Sound familiar?

Chapters 1-39 are about the harsh judgement of God, the destruction of Jerusalem and their Exile. Chapters 40-55 announce the gospel of forgiveness and restoration. In these chapters God makes it clear what is required of the people. We begin to see this in Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

²He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,^[a]
a light to the nations,

⁷to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;

before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Walter Brueggmann points out in his commentary on Isaiah that “My servant” is the people of Israel. God acknowledges the pain and suffering the Israelites endured while in exile, however, he also summons them beyond their own pain and grief and reminds them that there is work to be done and they are to do it! God says, not just once but three times, you are to bring forth justice, a reordering of the social life and social power so that the weak (widows and orphans) may live a life of dignity, security and well-being. Israel itself is to practice vulnerability and to be attentive to others who are vulnerable, the “bruised reeds and dimly burning wick.” Walter Brueggman says, “the work of the servant is to make clear that it is the will of the Creator that is to be enacted by the servant. The reason the servant can bring light is that God is against the darkness. The reason debts are cancelled and the poor are liberated is that God is attentive to the vulnerable and wills none to live as prisoners.” (Walter Brueggmann. Isaiah 40-66 (Louisville: Knox Press, 1998)

Then we come to today’s scripture passage, Isaiah 58:1-14 in it the poet urges a strong vision of the future community that is ethically demanding, that requires policies and actions of a neighborly kind that are congruent with its profession of God. Listen as I read:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator^[a] shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.
¹³ If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;^[b]
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The complaint is registered by the worshippers that even though they dutifully fast and humble themselves their acts of devotion go unnoticed by God. The notice, seems to be the only reason they are worshipping in the first place. It seems as if the purpose of their worship and prayers is to gain some sort of favor or advantage with God.

We have all heard the saying, “practice what you preach”, or “actions speak louder than words.” All the fasting in the world doesn’t mean a thing when laborers are being oppressed and we are hurling insults at one another. Brueggmann puts it this way, “Worship that is not congruent with the humane treatment of others is bad worship!” God says, “the fast I choose, is to humble oneself, to bow down, to lie in sackcloth and ashes.

The fast I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless into your home, to cloth the naked, and to not hide yourself from your own kin. (Isaiah 58:6-7) "Your own Kin," the hungry, and the homeless are our family with whom we inextricably belong.

The triad of requirements speaks against a self- preoccupation with one's own needs and desires; and asserts that we are members of one another and have an obligation to see that all members of the community are cared for. If this ethical mandate is followed then God promises immense well-being: light, healing protection and safety.

God doesn't want or need our worship God wants us to be transformed by the gospel and by the power of his love. It is not enough for us to simply show up on Sunday mornings confess our sins, pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, sing a hymn or two and then go back to business as usual Monday morning. American philosopher William James once said, "indifference is the one trait to make the very angels weep." Like the Israelites, we are too preoccupied with ourselves, and our daily routines to care for the people around us who are suffering. We often make the excuse that we don't have time but the truth of the matter is we will make the time for the things that are a priority to us. In a Ted Talk by Laura Vanderkam on Time Management she explains time like this: there are 168 hours in a week, subtract from that 8 hours a day (x) 7 which is 56 for sleep and that leaves you with 112 hours; subtract from that 40 hours for work or school which leaves you 72 hours or say you work 50 hours, that leaves you 62 hours, or say you work 60 hours that leaves you 52- still plenty of hours, so it's not that we don't have time, we do, it becomes a matter of what is a priority for us as to how will we spend those hours. God says a priority should be our neighbor, specifically our neighbors in need. God says "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a

watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in.” (Isaiah 58:10-11)

With promises like this from God then why are we so slow to act? The reason is because serving requires sacrifice. Serving is messy. It takes us to unknown places; perhaps even dangerous places. It requires that we confront our own prejudices, insecurities and greed. We are slow to act because at times our efforts go unnoticed, unrecognized and perhaps even unappreciated, and because there is more to be done than humanly possible which leaves us feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. Sometimes in our efforts to serve we get it wrong, we offend those we are trying to help, and we offer the wrong kind of help. However, we must remember that love isn't a state of perfect caring, it is an active noun like struggle and when we are willing to struggle for the sake of someone else God says to us, “I will guide you continually and satisfy your ever need.”

The needs of God's children are great.

According to a new report released by the Children's Defense Fund every day in the United States 5 children are killed by abuse and neglect, 1,844 are confirmed abused or neglected, and nearly 443,000 children are in foster care. In 2017, there were 101,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted, and that same year 23,000 children aged out of foster care with no family and no home.

The future for these children who age out of the system is bleak. Statistics show that 20% of the children who age out instantly become homeless. Only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24. Only 6% of children who age out will attend an institution of higher learning and of those 50% never finish.

Josh Shipp is a motivational speaker who grew up in the foster care system. He told how he was bounced around from foster home to foster home as a child, and how he became so hopeless that he started trying to get kicked out of each new home he was placed in and he even kept a record of his shortest stay because he believed he wasn't cable of being loved. He was 14 when he met Rodney and Christine. He sized Rodney up quickly to find his weakness and started doing everything he could to get kicked out, and 3 years later he was still there, Rodney and Christine weren't giving up. Finally, he said Rodney told him, "we don't see you as a problem, we see you as an opportunity, we are not giving up on you." Josh said, "Rodney didn't see what I had done he saw what I could be."

You don't have to be a foster care kid to face tremendous challenges, difficult circumstances, to be depressed, lonely or being bullied.

3.2 million children are bullied every year

1.2 million children drop out of school

90% of adult addicts begin using drugs before the age of 18

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds.

These statistics represent all of our children, from the most ideal to the most unideal situations. Every child is one decision away from being a statistic. Statistically Josh should be dead, in jail, or in prison but he's not a statistic and it's because of one caring adult, one imperfect caring adult. In March of 2015 Harvard's national scientific counsel on the development of children released a study that showed that every child who winds up doing well has had a least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.

The challenge for us is this: to be that one imperfect, caring adult for a child who is struggling. It doesn't take much, one hour a week can change the course of a child's life forever. If you do not know a child you can invest in contact the school nearest you, ask to speak to their volunteer coordinator or school guidance counselor, call the foster care agency in

your area, volunteer with the Big Brother, Big Sister program, or talk to the children and youth pastor at your church. They will be able to help you get the training you need if any, and connect you with a child. Honestly, the stakes are too high for us not to. God says, “do not hide yourself from your own kin, and these children are our own kin.” They are our responsibility. They are precious in God’s sight and should be to us as well.

I recently heard this quote which I love, “as just one person I cannot change the world but I can change the world of one person.” Yes, the needs are great and can seem overwhelming, but we are called to be God’s servants, to love our neighbor, to care for the widow and the orphan, the hungry and the homeless and when we do God promises to pour out his blessings upon us. May it be so. Amen

Suggestion: our choir sang this spiritual at one of our Children Sabbath services. I thought I would include what I had written then that was in the bulletin and you may can include the suggestion in the tool kit if you would like.

The anthem the choir is singing, “Up Over My Head” is an African American spiritual written during the time of slavery. It was sung with a great deal of hope that one day there would be freedom, justice, love and peace for everyone, not just some. Today we sing it for children who are abused and neglected. We sing as a reminder that we are called to be God’s servants and to bring freedom, justice, love and peace to these children

Sources:

Children's Rights Protecting kids, Providing Hope. Foster Care
(ChildrensRights.org)

Laura Vanderkam. Ted Talk, "How to Gain Control of Your Free Time."
December 6, 2016

The State of America's Children 2020; Children's Defense Fund

Walter Brueggemann. Isaiah 40-66 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998)