

“Giants, beware”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Samuel 17:1, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

People say that fatherhood makes you wiser. And I suppose that’s true—if, by “wiser,” they mean realizing how incompetent you are at pretty much everything. I just want to say that when they had us put the diaper on that plastic baby doll in our infant care class, not once did that baby pee me in the face. Emerson, on the other hand... Oh, and he’s sneaky too. He’ll wait for you to get him all changed, in new cute clothes, and then just as you’re about to close up the diaper, bam! He’s like Old Faithful down there!

Amid the diapers, and the sleepless nights, and the thousand times I anxiously check on him, there is a love so sudden, so total, so absolute that sometimes I forget to breathe. I can’t tear my eyes away from that little boy’s face—how beautiful it is, how stunning. I look at him—I look into those big brown eyes—and I think of the world I want to give him, a wondrous world full of dreams and music and books. And then I think of all the people, and all the things, that would stand in his way, and to them, to all the giants that stride this world, I say, “Beware.” Beware this father. Beware this love. It is more powerful than any weapon at your disposal.

And it’s not just my love.

Last week, Jenna and I got to know a very brave woman who loves her child so much that she chose us to parent him, because right now she can’t be everything to him that she wants to be. She had lawyers, social workers, family, all giving her power to choose. And she chose an open adoption that will give her a chance to know and be known by this child as his first mother.

That is mighty love.

As Jenna and I celebrate the precious gift of this child, holding him in our arms, I cannot but reflect on the thousands of parents whose children have been ripped from their arms. These are parents who chose to cross hundreds of dangerous miles to bring their child to a better future, seeking asylum from violence and poverty at home. They’re not unfit parents. They’re not murderers or drug dealers. They’re the best of us: parents who risk everything for their children. They’re the kind of people we should be proud to call our neighbors. Brilliant, brave, amazing people. And we’re putting them in cages. And it doesn’t matter how pretty or nice the cages are; a cage is a cage. And in that cage are children begging for their mommies and daddies.

They came here treading ground not unlike that narrow valley separating the Philistine and Israelite armies. A valley of the shadow of death. And there above that valley stands Goliath, almost 10 feet tall, bulging muscles, a bronze helmet on his head, 125 pounds of armor draped over his body, a javelin and a spear as big as a man, and a shield-bearer before him. It’s a posterous image, unless Goliath is more than a man; he’s a symbol.

I imagine David looking up at Goliath and seeing in him every man who ever threatened to hurt his people. David saw every lion, every bear, every predator that had ever roamed the borders of his flock or absconded with a lamb. He saw every hunger pang, every illness, every hope dashed.

What do we see in Goliath? For, there are giants still. They threaten to take away our life, our freedom, our joy, our children. They go by many names: poverty, hate, addiction, abuse. And immigration.

Immigration can be gentle and lovely, but as the world faces a refugee crisis like none it has ever witnessed before, immigration becomes a giant. It is a giant to the people forced to flee their homes, be they Syria or Guatemala—people compelled to leave behind the land and the history and the people they love, because the alternative was death. And it is a giant to those of us who live in nations ill equipped to legally and compassionately handle the need of so many.

Saul was the greatest, tallest, strongest warrior the Israelites had, and even he was afraid. For 40 days, the Israelites searched for a champion who could stand as tall as Goliath and swing as mighty a spear.

It's easy to see the logic: only a giant can defeat a giant. Maybe that's why, in the face of this overwhelming need, some of us have turned to other giants—to hate and bigotry, to fear mongering and nativism, or to something as fearsome and terrible as the forced separation of parents from their children. A morally corrupt, deplorable policy, condemned even by its authors, and yet defended as a necessary evil.

But what did it get Saul and the Israelites? Forty days of stalemate, two armies banging their shields at each other. Forty days of fear and suffering. And what does it get us? Not a solution. Just more pain.

Young David, however, knows something the others do not. It's something he learned years ago, as a shepherd guarding his flock—that when you're facing overwhelming odds, you put your trust in God. You trust that you are exactly where you need to be and that God has given you exactly the gifts you need to rise to this challenge. You trust that this love is stronger than any giant.

David rejects the armor that would make him a champion. He can't walk in it.

He chooses instead the little things that are already a part of him: a staff, a few smooth stones, a sling. He runs into that battlefield like a brother who loves his people, loves his flocks and its lambs, loves the green fields and the patched houses and even the desert sands. He runs with a love that says, "Giants, beware!"

David shouts, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts."

David shows us that there is only one way to take down a giant. It's not with a sword, or a spear, or a cage. It's with a small smooth stone tucked away in our pocket, an unexpected strength and faith placed there by God.

It's boring, unimpressive, everyday things that, when combined with love and faith, fell giants.

Today, I see Davids all around. I see Roger Dilmore organizing Cayuga County's first gathering to network and advance services for immigrants. That was just two weeks ago. I see Kim Patch going with her daughter Alex to the Pride rally in Syracuse to celebrate the beautiful person she was made to be. I see amazing teenagers decked out in rainbows and love. I see Paul Dungey and Shavonn Lynch holding in prayer the hand of a man incarcerated just down the street. I see an empty, resurrection cross around his neck. I see Aaron Creighton telling his story at our Unity Picnic as we dream of ending unemployment and fostering living wages in Auburn.

I see thousands of Presbyterians gathered in St. Louis last week for the 223rd General Assembly. I see that assembly standing in thunderous applause as they affirm the church's commitment to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of people of all gender identities. I see a vote to stand in solidarity with our Native American brothers and sisters. I see the creation of new resources for people living with mental illness. I see a church considering adding Rev. Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail to our Book of Confessions.

I see a town in Tennessee, the birthplace of Davy Crockett, rising to protect its immigrants when ICE came to take them away. I see so many donations of food, clothing, and toys that the church parking lot was blocked for hours. I see teachers hugging students whose parents had been taken away. I see a thousand people huddled in prayer in a school gym. I see the local college inviting a young man to tell his story after his brother and uncle were detained. I see a peace march through the town, with signs saying, "We miss you. We need you."

I see Presbyterians carrying water into the desert in Arizona. I see Republicans and Democrats, progressive and evangelical Christians all calling for the uniting of families. I see people standing up, linking arms, and facing down giants.

And now, a victory! President Trump has signed an executive order to end the separation of families. But the giant's not down yet. We still have to figure out how to reunite these families. We still have to come up with reasonable and compassionate immigration reform. We still have to change the ugly rhetoric and attitudes that have divided this nation and turned us against what we once were: a refuge.

What will your stone be? A hug. A story read to children. A post on Facebook. A hundred flyers printed with old ink. A rainbow flag. A hot meal. A sermon. A prayer. A protest. A friendship.

As we look around for our Goliath, our champion to meet theirs, let us look instead to ourselves, to the little ones, among whom God stands, let us look to the Davids, the tiny stones in our pockets, ratchet back our arms, and throw them with all our might. Thousands, nay millions of stones, flying through the air.

Let us show the world how we answer any giant who seeks our lambs, our children. Let us say that we come in the name of the Lord of hosts. We come with sling and stone and the love of our children. Let us say, "Giants, beware." **Amen.**