



“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands” (Acts 17:24). If only Paul knew how much we would need to hear/read his words thousands of years later. If only Paul knew how much his words would be brought to life more than he ever envisioned. As much as we have been drilled into realizing God is everywhere in the world, in the universe, in...well, everywhere (not to mention doing our fair share of thanking God for a variety of happenings to our benefit in all these different geographical places in our

life); we may have, still, subconsciously believed that God may come and go to different places, yes, but God ultimately lives in sanctuary shrines...right? If only Paul had the slightest idea of how his words were about to be fulfilled in places beyond sanctuary walls all over the world (granted, divine work has been happening *everywhere* since the beginning of time, but this is rather unique circumstances for us in our collective spiritual awareness, to say the least), including in Needham, Massachusetts, a western suburb of Boston.

Back in 1922, The Rev. Dr. Harry W. Kimball began serving as minister for the Congregational Church of Needham (now Needham United Church of Christ). The congregation was growing at this point in its 50+ year history, but a couple years into Dr. Kimball's pastorate...something happened. On Saturday, January 5, 1924, a fire almost obliterated the original church building. So, Dr. Kimball had no choice but to start one of those lovely capital campaigns to finance building an even larger sanctuary, an assembly hall to seat 200 people, as well as new classrooms for the just-as-expanding Sunday school. Dr Kimball had such a gift for filling that church with all ages, as he did his fair share of Sunday school teaching himself (and, just as importantly, recruiting others teachers to lead), that the Sunday school program grew from 175 to 480 students. And then...the Great Depression.<sup>i</sup>

As with many places across the country, and throughout the world, Needham was hit hard with economic volatility. It would, obviously, take more than just ministry inside church walls to help those in need. So, in March of 1930, many neighbors in Needham came together to create a community-wide agency to better assist those in dire straits. The presiding officer? The Rev. Dr. Harry W. Kimball. It would become known as the Needham Community Council. “The first programs supported by the Council included a Red Cross Welfare Bureau, the creation of a Labor Exchange in Needham [which became a free employment bureau for the town] and endorsement of the Community Christmas Celebration. An early need to address hunger in town was met by the distribution of holiday food baskets and the creation of the Council Food Pantry.”<sup>ii</sup>

In case you haven't heard, the Needham Community Council has been drawing its fair share of headlines recently, because of what is known as The Front Steps Project. The movement started just over two months ago (almost 90 years to the day the Needham Community Council began), when Boston photographer Cara Soulia and her friend, Kristen Collins, collaborated to continue photographing families in the reality of the physically-distancing time. As the name suggests, instead of meeting in a family living room or some studio, the photographer takes shots of the family on their home's front steps (all while keeping the recommended distance away). In

just over a week's time, over 500 residents of Needham had turned the movement into a national craze. The best part? The photographers, as opposed to payment for their services, ask the families to donate to the Needham Community Council, which helps provide clothing, food, transportation, tutoring and more (of course, some programs are presently affected by COVID-19). In due time, hundreds of other photographers across the country followed suit, and over \$1 million has been raised for respective local organizations and non-profits.<sup>iii</sup>

“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands” (Acts 17:24). Paul had no idea how much he was about to be proven right, even by a pastor, who could fill a church building after it was nearly burned to the ground. A pastor, who would be faced with a most horrifying nightmare that would define an entire generation and decided to bring ministry to life all the more outside the walls of his packed church. I doubt even Dr. Kimball and his Needham neighbors would envision their collective Needham Community Council being more fully equipped to respond to a devastating pandemic 90 years later with the help of people taking pictures of families on front porches, but...it's happening.

The pictures, themselves, reveal some rather Great News in spite of physical distancing and fear and worry about what lies ahead: smiles are still happening! Joy is still contagious. Love is, still, fully active amongst these families, who have been told to change their lives against their better wishes. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Perhaps, 90 years from now, these pictures will emerge, yet again, and a story will be told: how this family of ours still managed to smile and laugh when the world was collapsing all around them. And, hopefully, they can tie it back to a pastor, who saw a fire and, with the help of many, rebuilt; or a group of Needham neighbors, who faced a form of hell and decided to come together for the benefit of all their neighbors. All of which, of course, can be tied back to a man from Galilee, where plenty of neighbors and friends turned against him: what must have been the most devastating personal circumstances leading to death on a cross; and decided to, still, rise up for the whole world for all eternity. Rise up to live and work not just inside sanctuary walls, but absolutely everywhere! Thanks be to God, indeed! Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Howell, Shala. “About the Congregational Church of Needham.” *Once Upon a Time in Needham*. <https://needhamuccarchives.wordpress.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> “It's Our 90<sup>th</sup> Year: How We Got Started.” *Needham Community Council, Inc.*, Taussig Communications, <http://needhamcommunitycouncil.org/>

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<sup>iii</sup> *The Front Steps Project*, Lawwwnch, <https://www.thefrontstepsproject.com/>