

NAME

Sunday Service Do The Right Thing - June 7, 2020.mp3

DATE

June 16, 2020

DURATION

31m 50s

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellsprings congregation.

[00:00:04]

Hi, everyone. You know, I think it's important for me to start this week by saying you're doing great.

[00:00:15]

Seriously, congratulations. You're doing great. You're you. And we we're living through, at least two history book chapters right now.

[00:00:24]

Simultaneously, we are adapting to sweeping and unexpected mass societal changes that are brought on by a global pandemic that has been with us for three months now.

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And we are living through the emotional upheaval now of a new civil rights movement focused on protecting black Americans from police violence.

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And we're living through all of the questions and the confusion that that brings up for each of us about our identity, our family members, our communities, our own internalized beliefs about race and equality in this country.

[00:01:08]

And by the way, notice I said we're living through at least two history book chapters because I know that some of us are beginning to ask if our democracy is strong enough to make it through the next six months. And I know that some of us had trees blown down in the storm this week and have no air conditioning in our homes right now. And it is a lot. You are living with a lot.

[00:01:43]

You're doing great.

[00:01:46]

I know that you're doing great because you're here. You're making the time to connect with each other and to feed your soul. And that means that you're still hungry for what's good. In this life and yes, I am preaching to myself as much as I'm preaching to you, but I am preaching to you.

[00:02:11]

You're doing great.

[00:02:16]

This feeling of all of these things layered on top of each other, including the hot weather. It's actually what led me to choose our movie to open our Spirit Flicks message series for the summer. This week, every summer at Wellspring's, we choose a different story. Each week, a movie or a television show to dig a little bit deeper into the meaning behind those stories that we watch on our screens. And this week, I decided we would start for this summer with an American classic.

[00:02:52]

Do the right thing.

[00:02:54]

It may be hard for some of you to believe that this movie is more than 30 years old. Now, though, if you watch it, you will see the 30 years younger versions of a lot of people Samuel L. Jackson, Martin Lawrence, John Turturro,

Rosie Perez, and, of course, the film's creator, Spike Lee, himself three decades younger.

[00:03:17]

The movie chronicles one day, one very hot day in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. And I do want to say, if you haven't seen this movie, I hope that you will watch it. It's such a real and honest movie. It's funny. It's devastating. Which is to say, it's very true to life.

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And even though I can't preach about it today without talking about the ending, I hope that you still watch it anyway. If you haven't seen it, because there's so much to this movie beyond how it ends.

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It is the violence, though, at the end of this film that ultimately clinched my decision to preach about it this week, because in the closing scenes of this movie, we see the same exact thing that we've seen in the news this week.

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We see a police officer murder a black man.

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Radio Raheem, a guy who walks around the neighborhood in a bed sty do or die t shirt with his glorious giant boombox that takes 20 D batteries to power. And I am going to speak about what happens at the end of this film right now, so I'm giving you some notice. If your heart can't take hearing one more story like this, especially for people in our community who are people of color who are watching right now and don't want to hear one more story about the threat to your bodies, go ahead and mute me for about a minute. About 60 seconds. At the end of this long, hot day in the movie, the police show up to break up a brutal fight between Radio Raheem and Sal, the pizza shop owner. And the cops pull Rahim off of cell when they get there, and then I think it's important to make this as clear as day. Then they do something that they did not need to do. They pull Rahim up off of Sal. But then one cop lifts him up with his feet off the ground, lifts him up in a chokehold. After a few seconds, his partner can even be heard saying, come on, come on, that's enough. But the police officer keeps his grip on Rahim until his body stops moving and he falls to the ground.

[00:06:12]

They murder him. It's exactly as disturbing as it should be.

[00:06:23]

Do the Right Thing was released in 1989. I was six years old. The character of Radio Raheem was based off of a real person, a man named Michael Stewart, who was murdered by police in a New York City subway station in 1983. Six years before the movie was released, the year that I was born.

[00:06:53]

When I learned that, I knew that I had to choose this movie to talk about this week. Because the very same crime that's still happening today. Here it is plain for all of us to see in a movie made 30 years ago. And here I am, a good progressive white woman who honestly didn't even start paying attention to these crimes, to the unnecessary violent killings of people of color by police in America until 2014. Until Eric Garner was killed in New York. And then Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson in the same year.

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I'm embarrassed to admit that. I was not paying attention before them. But it's true. I didn't recognize the gravity or the frequency. Of how these murders keep happening before 2014.

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And one of the things that is changed now, of course, right, is that we are in an era of cell phones and video and going live on social media. And so people are able to broadcast gruesomely horribly, are able to broadcast and show us these murders. Now.

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But here we were 30 years ago. Spike Lee had already put it on the screen for all of us to see.

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He put it on the screen and such a brutal and beautiful container. Two hours in this movie of slices from this single day in Brooklyn. Just an unflinching mix of the joy and the pain of living alongside people who you love and who piss you off on a hot day in the middle of systems and circumstances that leave all of us with no perfect choices. And that sets none of us up to be at our best. Sounds a lot in some ways like what we've all been facing these past three months. How imperfect all of our choices sometimes feel right now when we know that so much is not working the way it should, when so much in this world is broken down. And we sometimes feel helpless or worn down or inadequate to meet the moment or just imperfect to. There is a time for movies and stories that ask us to face up to our pain. But part of why I was moved to talk about this film at this moment is because of the way that Spike Lee doesn't just hold the pain. He holds the joy around the same story. As a film maker in this movie, Spike Lee holds so much roomy and abundant compassion for his characters.

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Every human in this film is allowed to be human. Presented just as they are.

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And somehow, without being saccharin in the least. And with all the ugly moments of our worst nature that Lee leaves on the screen, I think because of that. Right. Because of this movie being honest about the full range of our human nature with all of that, somehow this movie is hopeful. There's a single moment in the film. Only one time when Spike Lee breaks the fourth wall. That's what they call it in film when a fictional character. Right. Normally you're watching the action. But when you break the fourth wall, the character turns and speaks directly to the camera, directly to the viewer. And in this movie, that moment is when Radio Raheem, about halfway through the movie, he holds up both of his fists. And he has two brass knuckle rings on his hands on the left hand.

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It says hate. And on the right hand it says love. And he says the story of life is this. Static.

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Static between the left hand and the right hand, one hand, he says. Always fighting the other hand. And he says just when it looks like the left hand is winning and the right hand love is finished. But hold on. Stop the presses. Right. Right hand is coming back.

[00:11:55]

Boom. Left hand hate knocked out by love.

[00:12:05]

It's a moment where the filmmaker wants us to notice and pay attention.

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And it's pretty much as good a universalist sermon as I've ever heard.

[00:12:19]

Left hand hate knocked out by love and the fight all the way to get there.

[00:12:26]

It's not that we as human beings are too good or too perfectible and wonderful to become angels to to earn our way into the good life.

[00:12:38]

It's that that God whose other name is love. The greatest love we can imagine is two powerful. It's that love wins. That love is too good to damn any of us. And we'll save us all in the end.

[00:13:00]

That love is out here fighting towards that goal every single day, calling us in every imperfect and hard and exhausted moment to back it up. Even if we can't do it that day, love never stops asking or fighting.

[00:13:19]

Love never gives up. Love calls to us forever.

[00:13:29]

The title of the movie Do the Right Thing. It's a line also in the film. It's spoken by Ossie Davis, the actor himself a civil rights activist who, by the way, was married to Ruby Dee, the actress who plays mother sister in the movie. In real life, Ossie Davis, his character is this guy that everybody calls the mayor, just like every other character in this movie. We learned the broad spectrum of his humanity, the good and the bad, the shades of every gray in between. We we know that the mayor uses alcohol to numb the pain of trauma, and he has lived through some hard things. We know from this movie that he has the capacity to love and to rage, to be protective and to manipulate. We'd like him and we dislike him at different turns. All throughout this film, when the mayor stops Mooky, the main character of the film, as he's walking down the street, he drops that title as a total non sequitur out of the blue Mooky. He says, getting his attention. This is the mayor talking. Mooky stops. And he says, always do the right thing.

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And Mooki says, that's it. That's it. I got it. I'm gone.

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The way that this exchange goes, it reminds me of how I think we all sometimes interact with our principles. Do the right thing.

[00:15:10]

Yeah, I know.

[00:15:13]

The inherent worth and dignity of every person that we affirm is Unitarian Universalist. Our mission at Wellspring's to be a community chargeable with a charge of the soul or one nation with liberty and justice for all, we know the words.

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This happens with any mission statement, any prayer, any creed, anything especially that maybe we were forced to repeat.

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Growing up, I got it. I'm gone.

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Sometimes our values just feel like words.

[00:15:51]

They feel weak. Compared especially to the living, breathing chaos that's around us. And sometimes they die on the page. But when we are awake. Then we notice all around us and every moment of every day that we are always being presented with opportunities to let them live.

[00:16:23]

And like every living thing, those words get a lot more complicated when they are alive and breathing in us.

[00:16:32]

They get tricky and thorny. They ask us to take risks. To grow, to be uncomfortable.

[00:16:43]

Love wins the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Always do the right thing.

[00:16:55]

And every turn in this movie, it presents us with the most natural of follow up questions.

[00:17:02]

What is the right thing?

[00:17:08]

It's the mayor who says it in the film. But we watch him try to live it. The whole movie, and sometimes he tries and sometimes he fails. And while sometimes we don't know one of the scenes that I can not get out of my head from this film. Is this remarkable scene that's just kind of sliced in there where the mayor saves the life of a young boy in the neighborhood. There's a car suddenly speeding down the street and this old man puts his body on the line. He risks his own injury or his death even to jump and throw this child out of the way on the street. It's just a flash sandwiched into an ordinary day, right? No big buildup. He just sees that bright, clear moment and he does what he can to protect a life. And then not 90 seconds later, the boy's mom comes out onto the street and she's angry at the boy for not being more careful and she starts to hit him. And the mayor again jumps in and says there's no need for that, that boy needs care and understanding. He's scared. He just made a mistake. And then the mother comes back with her own understanding to the mayor. She says, I'm his parent. I'll decide how to parent him.

[00:18:32]

And the mayor backs down.

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It was one of the more challenging scenes in the film for me, but the truth is there are a lot of scenes like that in this film. It's repeated endlessly all throughout. People trying to do the best they can with the situation in front of them. Who succeed sometimes and who fail sometimes.

[00:18:57]

Who are noble in one moment and self protective in the next. They're principled for a heartbeat and then they compromise with the person in front of them. Spike Lee as a filmmaker is masterful at keeping us with them. In those moments. They and we, we are reminded, are so utterly human.

[00:19:26]

We are principled one moment and we compromise the next.

[00:19:30]

We are heroic in one second and avoidant. And the next. We are all trapped in so many inhuman systems and cycles and stories that leave us confused.

[00:19:47]

And distanced. From what the right thing really is.

[00:19:56]

It reminds me of that feeling when I was a kid and I go to a birthday party and an adult would string up a pinata.

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All right. We've probably all been that kid or maybe as an adult, but the adult would string up a pinata and hand me a wiffle bat and blindfold me and spin me around and around.

[00:20:21]

I can still remember that disoriented feeling knowing I had a goal and that it was a good goal and that everybody around me was just trying to have fun.

[00:20:32]

And it was all part of the game, but also feeling queasy and lost.

[00:20:43]

I realized watching this movie, I've had that exact feeling a lot lately when I look at our world and I try to think about doing the right thing.

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Maybe you've had that feeling, too.

[00:21:01]

And the truth is, we can play games with pinatas and with candy. The stakes are low, but with human beings and lives and hearts and our safety, these are not games. Disorientation in these moments is dangerous.

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What we need is clarity.

[00:21:27]

We need to put a hand up to any system that tries to blindfold and spin us around. We need to refuse to take part.

[00:21:38]

These times that we're living through, they're not times to be playing games, whether political or economic, whether games about ego and power or who wins and loses. These are times for us all to insist upon the clearest sight.

[00:21:57]

The clearest sight of our values.

[00:22:01]

To live them instead of letting them lay dead somewhere on a page.

[00:22:09]

What does our vision look like when it comes to life? How do we make the world whole? What choices must we make to honor the worth of every person? And how do we stay full of that charge of the soul?

[00:22:33]

Many of us know where that wine comes from. And Wellspring's mission statement. If you don't, it's from the opening stanza of the poet Walt Whitman's I Sing the Body Electric.

[00:22:47]

He says, I sing the body electric. The armies of those I love in girth, me and I, and girth them. They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them and dis corrupt them and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

[00:23:17]

This is not just an individual belief that we gather around here at Wellspring's. It's not just a belief in each one of us feeling charged up and ready to go. It's about dis corrupting whole communities, armies of those we love connected and embracing and refusing to let go until we see and honor that connection, acknowledging that the charge of life that is mine is yours, too, and yours is mine.

[00:23:51]

Singing that this body that all bodies are electric. A literal scientific current of charge and breath runs between us all.

[00:24:06]

A friend posted a quote this week online, and I copied it onto my own Facebook pages from the black activist Angela Davis. She says you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world and you have to do it all the time.

[00:24:26]

Especially for those of us who maybe are like me, who live in relative comfort, who hold any kind of position where we influence others. And you don't have to be a minister to hold a position of influence. We influence our families, our coworkers, our communities, our friends, our congregations. We have to remind people that words are just words, unless we live them, unless we wrestle with the risk and the inevitable cycles of success and failure that come with insisting on this world made whole. With this world where all people are treated as full human beings and where we recognize that life has worth more than net worth or property worth or reputation or buildings or comfort or peace and quiet life has worth.

[00:25:22]

People have worth.

[00:25:27]

That belief, if you live, it will change you. It has the potential to change everything. And if you are lucky. It will keep on changing you until the day that you die.

[00:25:46]

You will just keep on getting closer and closer as you go to that big, expansive heart that we trust in. As universalists. The heart that can hold it all. The God whose other name is love. I've read about a lot of big changes this week. And I am hopeful.

[00:26:13]

I'm hopeful that the noise that's being made in the streets, as inconvenient or uncomfortable as it might be or even dangerous or hard to watch for some of us. I'm hopeful that it is doing exactly what it was intended to do.

[00:26:29]

Which is to get us all paying attention.

[00:26:32]

I hear many of you saying that more of your friends, your family, your extended family members are starting to wake up and say some new things and new ways that you had not heard them speak before. I see stories shared of cities and local governments beginning to question why we have pumped money into local police forces, given them military equipment. Asked them to fill gaps in our communities, our mental health systems that are not the police problems to solve.

[00:27:06]

In the city of Los Angeles, the mayor announced on Thursday that he's pulling one hundred and fifty million dollars out of the police budget and redirecting it towards spending on community programs. In Minneapolis, the city's school district has ended their contract with the local police. Committing to find other ways to staff their schools that will better address community safety. And here in Philadelphia. A small thing, but I think a move in the right direction. After a few really difficult days in our city, the police commissioner, Danielle Outlaw, she made a minor but very necessary change to the use of force policy for our police force, requiring that any officer who chooses to engage force report it via a police radio in the moment.

[00:28:03]

To say out loud what they are about to do. Not to write a report. Or justify it later with words, but to name to everybody on that radio what they are about to do as they live it, requiring the smallest of pauses. But a pause that may help someone recognize that question. Is this the right thing to do? In this moment. If you're watching with us on Sunday morning and if you would like to.

[00:28:43]

Maybe you have things that you are seeing shift. Things that you might like to share with us. You can type it into the chat. What are the signs of hope?

[00:28:54]

That you're noticing.

[00:28:56]

What do you see these days that reminds you that this discomfort that we are feeling in this moment is worth something?

[00:29:05]

That it is making and we are making a difference. These things that give us some hope, we have to keep seeing them and naming them and sharing them with each other. Not because it's a way to shut out the reality of what's disturbing us. Not at all. As a way to keep us going. As a way to remember that we are capable of change and we are capable of growth, and not only that, we must keep growing.

[00:29:41]

To live.

[00:29:44]

And let me suggest something. If you name something that gives you hope. If you talk about something you're seeing around you that makes you feel like we are in the right direction, like we are on the right track. And somebody else says, yeah, but that's not enough.

[00:30:00]

That's OK. Let yourself wonder if they're right.

[00:30:07]

Ask yourself. Maybe it's not enough.

[00:30:12]

Maybe when you meet that person, you've encountered your next teacher.

[00:30:18]

You've encountered someone who believes it's possible to radically transform this world even more than you could imagine. This is how we look around. And see clearly. All of these imperfect systems that we are a part of. It's how we take off our blindfolds. And put down or whiffle bats. And orient ourselves again. Letting our insides settle. Letting the dizziness subside. And refocusing on our goal. A life lived abundantly for all people. A world where we are all safe and loved. May we reflect that world back to each other wherever we can? Wherever we see it. And may we fight to make it possible? To do the right thing.

[00:31:29]

And each moment that we can. I mean. And may you live and blessing.

[00:31:38]

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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