

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: August 7, 2011
Sermon Title: Lines in the Sand
Scripture: John 4:5-42
Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

The cool thing about having been a minister here for a pretty long time now, the cool thing about having run a youth group here for a couple decades, is that you get to feel like kind of like the proud parent of a couple thousand pretty amazing young people (even as you come to terms with the fact that some of your “children” are now turning forty). And there’s a lot to be proud of. A whole lot of “our” kids are out there teaching, some in pretty tough places like the Mississippi Delta and the seediest neighborhood of Las Vegas. Some are working with autistic kids, some are building environmentally sound houses, some are dazzling their bosses with great new ideas, some are their own bosses now. Most of all, an awful lot of them have become just awfully good people, and in that we can all take parental pride.

But this morning I want to highlight two of “our children,” who even as we speak are on the shores of the Caspian Sea in, believe it or not, a yellow school bus which they have managed to get from Hillside Road in Fairfield all the way across the Atlantic and through 20-odd countries on their way to Mongolia. Yes, Mongolia. Grif and Casey Peterson, brother and sister dynamic duo, along with friends that they talked into it, are in the process of driving a yellow school bus across Europe and Asia, down highways, byways, and “no ways” to raise money for a bunch of good causes. Across the side of the bus is emblazoned the slogan “2 Big 2 Fail”, and fail they will not. When they get to Mongolia, they’ll donate the school bus to the local folks, and make their way back home again.

Now, there’s some question as to whether they’re completely *sane* but there’s no question that they’re completely compassionate, and wonderfully adventurous. I’m pretty darn proud, and so should you be.

Along the way, Grif's been posting blogs on their website. Let me share with you just a little from a recent blog, wherein the bus was discovered to be in great need of a tune-up just as they reached Istanbul. This is what Grif wrote:

“Armed with just a few hundred lira and a scribbled note indicating the part of town our hostel receptionist thought that we might find a mechanic, [my busmate] Robin and I headed out in the dull heat of early afternoon. After a few wrong turns, some bad directions, and a personal-best *15 point turn* on a road that our little bus had positively no business being on, [we ended up at a shop called] F&L Otomotiv. With no common language, Robin and I set forth explaining what on Earth we were doing in Istanbul with an American school bus and, more importantly, what we needed done to the bus. After spreading out a world map, wall calendar, Haynes repair manual, and calculator on the hood of the bus, both parties reached an understanding of what work was needed.

Our lead mechanic, Ozcan, opened the doors of his shop to us, so while he changed the oil, I could clean out the air filters and Robin could reshape the metal rim of the passenger door, which had an unfortunate run in with a signpost in Kosovo. When questions arose that hand gestures simply couldn't fulfill, we would duck next door to the refrigeration shop where [the owner] was happy to converse on our behalves ... Through this, we were happily served tea and water, even though our hosts were unable to join us due to Ramadan.

By the time afternoon prayer arrived, I realized that my day had not seemed like a series of chores, but rather a unique way of seeing a city firsthand. I was part of the daily ebb and flow of a neighborhood – curious onlookers would come over and talk, some for twenty seconds, others for half an hour, and we quickly moved back and forth across streets, drawing brake pads from one locale and diesel from another.”

“Will ‘*spend a day with the mechanics in Istanbul*’ ever make Lonely Planet's top 10 must see list?” wrote Grif. “Absolutely not. But that experience afforded us a unique sense of the city that is just as Istanbuli as the Haya Sofia itself.”

What I loved about reading this is what I've loved about reading all their blog entries: there is a particular spirit which permeates them, a spirit of openness to everyone they meet, and a genuine delight in encountering the

new. The image of a former Junior Deacon of this church working side by side with a Muslim mechanic in Istanbul during Ramadan, well, that's an image of connection that works pretty powerfully in my heart.

And I share this story with you, this little glimpse of two of 'our' kids crossing the world, crossing boundaries, and crossing cultures, because the scripture story that Ellen shared with you is all about that. All about being willing to cross the boundaries, cross the lines, in every conceivable way. You heard the story. But let me remind you of it again. Jesus, on his own cross-country adventure, crossed wearily over the border from Judea into Samaria, his sights set on the next border, Galilee. But he was exhausted, and hungry, and alone, his disciples having wandered off another direction in search of food. And then he saw it – a welcome sight for a tired traveler – a well. But a well by itself does no good to a thirsty person – you need a bucket to draw the water. And so Jesus, Christ himself, had to wait until someone showed up.

And she did. A woman from the village, whom Jesus asked for water under the broiling noontime sun. In Samaria.

This summer on the Appalachia trip, a pastor from a church with whom we shared our work center told this story as our morning devotion, telling the scripture as powerfully as I've ever heard it told, making us feel the heat of that sun, and the terrible thirst Jesus felt, and the woman making her way to the well, startled to find him sitting there, stunned to find this Jewish man there asking her for water. And then he asked this, the pastor asked our teenagers this. "What is amazing about this?" he asked. "What is amazing about this conversation? Why is it amazing that Jesus even asked her for help?" It took them a little while to answer – I should add that these were 7 a.m. devotions, so it took all of us a while to answer anything – but then one of our kids said, tentatively, "She was a woman. Were men allowed to talk like that to women then?" "Absolutely not" said Pastor Jeff.

"What about being Samaritan?" said someone else. "That's right," said Jeff, "you weren't even allowed to use a cup that a Samaritan had used." "And what else made it amazing that he talked to her?"

Well, that stumped them. *Samaritan woman* seemed like it covered everything. "She was there at noon." Jeff finally said. "And no one goes out in the heat of the day, you go out early, when the air is still cool. If you're there at noon, it's 'cause you don't want to run into anyone. So there's something else

we know about this woman – she was some kind of outcast, someone who'd been hurt by others too many times to want to be seen by them.”

“Here’s my point,” Pastor Jeff said to all of us on that Appalachian morning. “Here’s the point. Jesus found himself that day talking to the unlikeliest of people and he didn’t care. Jesus didn’t think twice about entering into conversation with someone who, by anyone else’s standards, he had no business talking to. Every possible dividing line stood between him and that woman, boundaries of gender and nation and class, and he didn’t care. “When you go out to those Appalachian hollers today,” said Jeff, “you’re going to find yourselves in moments just like Jesus did with people who are different and barriers between you. And you just do like he did. You cross those barriers.”

You cross those barriers, said Pastor Jeff. That’s why I started us off today talking about our friend Grif working side by side with Ozcan the mechanic with no shared language between them no shared country but a cup of tea kindly poured at teatime in the midst of Ramadan. No one in that moment seemed to care too much about lines and boundaries and barriers.

That was Jeff’s point. That was Jesus’ point. In a time when Samaritans were reviled, this Jewish man shared a cup of water with her; in a time when religious purity was everything, this religious teacher talked to an outcast, In a time when women weren’t even thought to be fully human, and certainly not spiritual, this Rabbi from Nazareth revealed to a woman that he was the Messiah. Boundaries meant nothing. Lines meant nothing.

Over the past couple weeks, I’ve heard a particular phrase used over and over to describe the intransigence of our leaders, the seeming inability of people to talk with each other. ‘Lines in the sand’, I’ve heard. “He won’t compromise on that,” I’ve heard, “he’s drawn a line in the sand.” “There’s no way she’ll vote yes,” I’ve heard, “that’s her line in the sand.”

We talk about drawing lines as if it’s a good thing. A principled and right thing. But all you have to do is look at Jesus. The line in the sand between him and that woman had been drawn by other people, and there was more than one. And he really couldn’t have cared less. He stepped across those lines in the sand, smudged them out with his sandal, erased them. He entered into conversation with the wrong person on the wrong topic at the wrong time, and it couldn’t have been more right.

What this story says is that God, Jesus, doesn't seem to think too much of our lines in the sand. What this story says is that those lines are actually meant to be crossed, that conversations are meant to be had, that open-hearted encounters with each other are not only acceptable, but are what God calls us into, are holy. At some most basic level, *holy*.

This story is a barrier-busting story, an expectation-defying story, a prejudice-overcoming story, a line-erasing story, and we, we are called to do all those things. We are called to let no walls stand in the way of our connections with each other, no barrier keep us from hearing each other. We are not in the business of drawing lines in the sand. Because the truth is that lines in the sand can way too easily become chasms, deep abysses separating us one from another.

Last Sunday, in the midst of the political maelstrom, my sister-in-law Donna sat in the pews of Rock Hill Congregational Church in Arlington, Virginia, just outside the beltway, and Donna listened as her pastor, Janet Parker, preached from Isaiah 58 – you, my people, says the Lord, shall be the repairers of the breach. This is what Rev. Parker said to her congregation: “This is our calling, my friends. [To be repairers of the breach] Standing within our society, we also have a loyalty that transcends it— we have a loyalty to God, who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of the whole world. We do not have the luxury of sticking in like-minded enclaves, of hating those who are different from us, or of allowing politics to trump the demands of justice. As children of God, we are constantly reminded by our faith that we are members of one another, that we are called to be imitators of God, to live in love as Christ loved us, and to be the repairers of the breach, when the chasms open up.”

No lines in the sand for us.

In just a few moments we gather as one body at the table of our Lord. Around this table, we are one with each other and one with the world for whom Jesus offered his life. He asks only that we now be the living reminders of his limitless grace, respecting no divisions but all people. He asks us, we who bear his name into this world to live out the promise of his Gospel, the promise that in him all may be made one ... all lines in the sand erased. Amen.