

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: In Christ There is No East or West, No North or South

Scripture: Matthew 8:5-11

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

Not quite five years ago, three women in our church came up with a really good idea. These three women – Zoe Grosser, Vickie Frankenburg and Bonnie Pfann – were all adult advisors on our 2007 Appalachia service trip, a trip that took them to the little town of Hinton, West Virginia. And one particular evening, after a long day of swinging hammers in the hot Southern sun, they wandered down the street to the little general store, where a wonderful little lady named Alice Kirk looked at them and said “you know, what you ladies need is one of my chocolate milkshakes,” and she whipped up for them. And somewhere in the next half-hour or so, as Zoe and Vickie and Bonnie sat sipping on their milkshakes, one of them said, “this is the best milkshake I ever had,” and another said “we ought to get Alice’s recipe,” and another said, “we ought to get a lot of recipes from all the folks down here, and we could put together an Appalachia cookbook.”

And then someone said, “you know what we could do, we could make a cookbook out of the best recipes from here in Hinton, and the best recipes from back home in Fairfield.” And so they did. My three friends worked their behinds off for the next few months and put together this cookbook, the Appalachia Service Cookbook – from Appalachia to New England, it says.

It was a great idea they had. Lots of good food from the mountains of West Virginia to the coast of Connecticut, and we’ve been selling these as a fundraiser ever since. But I have to tell you – this isn’t just a recipe-book. All it takes is thumbing through a few pages to realize that this is a *story*-book. It’s a story about a bunch of people from different places and different histories coming together in one place -- called together by God’s own Spirit not just to care for one another, but to learn from one another.

All that from a bunch of recipes? Oh yeah. Let me show you what I mean. Page 60 is a recipe for something called leather britches, from a woman in MeadowBridge, West Virginia: You need a batch of firm green beans, it says, and you want to thread a needle with heavy thread, string the beans together like a necklace, and hang him up to dry. After they're dried, you can keep them that way a long time— when you're ready to eat, boil them up with salt pork and they're ready. Right near there is a recipe for Pepper Chicken, and this recipe is from Sierra Leone, because that's where our own Hanciles family is from, and Cleophas and Claire have both served on the Appalachia trip, Claire just went again as an adult advisor.

Leather Britches and Pepper Chicken, and then there's Anny Ward's recipe for Martha's Vineyard Chicken, which includes my favorite line of any recipe I've ever made: Add one cup red wine, says Anny. Then drink 1 cup yourself. There's a recipe in here from my mother, who went on the trip as an advisor in '07 – This was Alida's favorite casserole as a child, she wrote – and it contains ground beef, Worcestershire sauce, and a half-cup of Karo corn syrup.

Also in here, recipes for sausage and gravy and biscuits, my stepson's *Vegan* chocolate chip cookies, fried green tomatoes, Cindi Bigelow's molasses cookies, Marnie Smith's scalloped oysters, and Flossie's Pork Cake – I'm not kidding – the first ingredient is one pound fat pork or lard.

And there's even a recipe in here for a Good Husband, submitted by Bertha and Dolly from West Virginia. "Even poorer varieties," it notes, "may be made sweet and tender by garnishing with love and patience."

So it's not just food in these pages, although I made myself darned hungry writing this part of the sermon. In these pages, Alice from Hinton meets Cleophas from Sierra Leone meets Aaron the Vegan and Anny who loves Martha's Vineyard meets Maxine who remembers her mom stringing green beans and Jennifer whose daughter Alida likes hamburger with Karo syrup.

All of which gives you a little glimpse of what happens on the Appalachia trip, every year, and again this year. It's not just fixing houses. It's people who have never been to West Virginia or never met a Vegan or never talked to someone from overseas or never thought of eating a green tomato all being

together, sharing stories and listening, entering into another person's life, another person's heart. Every where I went on this year's trip, every house I visited where our folks were at work, I saw it happening ... right up to Friday afternoon. Standing in the floor of a trailer that needed an awful lot of work – I do mean standing IN, not standing ON, I looked out to see one of our kids sitting side-by-side with the old man whose trailer it was, listening intently. “I learned about his whole life,” she told me later. “It was really cool.” That **is** really cool, and I got to see it happening over and over again.

Truth is, I am as interested in seeing kids sitting side-by-side talking as I am in seeing them swinging hammers. The reason we take a whole lot of kids to Appalachia each year is not just to fix houses, though we do that, and we do it well. The reason we take them somewhere very different – a place where grandma still strings up green beans in the backyard – is to make sure our kids AND our adults come to discover other folks, other cultures, live and learn past the boundaries. At the early service this morning, we sang along to ‘Teach Your Children Well,’ and that's what we want to do – we want to teach them to know what is different.

That's why we take people to India, too – that's why I took a dozen people back in February, eight of our teens and four adults. We all gathered together for a little six-month reunion on Friday night, and we laughed and reminisced about the time we ate food so hot that we were crying, about the music and the dancing that we never did figure out how to do, about never taking flush toilets for granted again. And most of all we talked about the people we missed, and the faces of children we now know as our little sisters, our little brothers.

Teach your children well. Indeed. We try to do that here, at Greenfield Hill... we try to find ways to make sure that we connect and learn and see and open and embrace.

I have thought a lot about this during this week, this week since last Sunday's shootings at the Sikh Temple in Wisconsin. The man who did it, we know, was a man who hated everyone who was other, who was different. And the people he shot belong to a faith tradition that has welcomed in the stranger, extended hospitality to all people. In the days after 9/11, David and I visited a Sikh Temple in New York, because then as now, ignorant people filled with anger and hate were attacking anyone wearing turbans, turbans that every Sikh man wears. So we went just to say “we know you, we honor your tradition, we stand with you.” And they welcomed us in and fed us a

meal. As Sikhs always do. Wade Page, who shot them, doubtless knew none of this about Sikhs. Doubtless knew nothing about them except that they wore turbans, had darker skin.

One more reminder – as if we needed any more – of how desperately important it is to create paths of connection, bridges of understanding – to set a young person down in a holler in Appalachia for a good long conversation, to take a teenager into the slums of India, to go into places of poverty, as our Habitat crew did yesterday, and work side by side with others.

And why do we do all this? Because Jesus did it first. If we are called to be Christlike, and we are, if we are asked to pause each day and say ‘what would Jesus do,’ and we are, then we need look no further than the scripture Betsy read to us to know exactly what Christ would do in a world of difference and diversity, in a country filled with the other and the unknown. He would cross every boundary to know and be known, to love and be loved. It is an extraordinary story that Betsy read to you. Jesus is out and about teaching and preaching, as he did every day, and a Roman centurion comes running to him. Stop and think about that for a moment. A Roman centurion. Think who it was who just a short while later would condemn Jesus to death, mock his teachings and persecute his followers. Romans. But here is a centurion, a commander of the Roman guard, who comes running to him and makes a desperate plea. My servant, he says – and this must surely be a beloved member of his household – my servant is sick, and I know you can heal him. There are any number of things Jesus could have said then. Your people oppress my people. Your faith is different from my own. How dare you come to me. Instead he says, I will come to your home right now. And the centurion says this, he says, “I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. I know that all you have to do is speak and my servant will be healed.” And Jesus says “I’ve never seen faith like yours *anywhere*.” And that’s it, the servant lying on his bed back home is healed.

Both men in this story have so much to teach us. Look at the centurion – a man who refuses to believe his party’s line that the Jews of Israel are lesser people, that this Jesus is some kind of charlatan. Instead, this Roman opens his heart to this Jewish Rabbi, and lets himself believe, know, that in this man from Galilee there is great goodness and great, great power. And look at Jesus – who not for a moment hesitates, not for one moment thinks about the history of suffering between these two peoples, or about the stark

differences in their beliefs – but instead says ‘take me to your home’ – an action, which, by the way, violated every Jewish law against interaction with Gentiles. Jesus did not care. In that moment, in that incredible moment, each person was utterly open to the other, absolutely unswayed by anything that they’ve ever been told to believe about the other, willing to know and to be known, to heal and to be healed. Because it wasn’t just the sick servant back home who was healed in that moment. Everyone who witnessed it was healed.

And that’s our teacher, that’s our Savior. That’s why doing whatever we can do to learn and to know, to connect, to be open, to cross all boundaries – is not just a good idea, is not just the right way to raise our children and ourselves. It is the faithful thing to do, it is the Christlike thing to do.

I’ll close with an Olympic story. All of you who were here last week know that last week’s sermon had so many Olympic stories in it that I almost forgot to get to the scripture passage – one of you cracked me up at the front door by saying it was a little like having Bob Costas in the pulpit. So this week I promise I’m keeping it to just one. And in fact, this Olympic story is not a track and field story, or a soccer story or basketball, though we could tell plenty of those. This is a story about a British Lord, considered by his peers to be *most* eccentric, but whom I consider to be rather inspiring. Lord Michael Bates, in preparation for the start of the Olympics, walked three thousand miles from Mount Olympia in Greece to London, to remind people of something long-forgotten but desperately needed: the Olympic Truce. Time was when nations declared a truce among all peoples during the games of the Olympiad, and Lord Bates wants people to remember that peace among nations is the ultimate goal of the Olympics, and of all humanity. So he walked, crossing countryside and country boundaries, talking to people everywhere he went.

And at the end of it, he said this to a reporter: “*A little girl asked me, “you have walked through 14 countries -- who were the nicest and who were the nastiest?” And the truth is they were all exactly the same. I stayed with people of all faiths, many nationalities, all colours, rich and poor, male and female, young and old. The truth is that they were exactly the same: if you smiled they smiled back. if you asked for directions they did their best to help ... They all loved their countries, and all wanted the best for their children. It became clear to me that national, ethnic and religious differences are an entire social construct. That good and evil are not determined by a line on a map but*

by a personal choice we make every day. We were all created from one human mould.... We are all one--that is what I learned. And it was worth the effort to discover it." Well said, Lord Bates.

May we then, followers of Christ, commit ourselves always to that same journey of discovery.

Amen.