

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 15, 2012  
Sermon Title: Race, Hope, and Church  
Scripture: Mark 7:25-30  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Mark 7:25-30

*But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Every year, a large bunch of high school students come to our church, and I have one hour to explain Protestantism, Congregationalism, Christianity, Greenfield Hill Church, and our attitude toward war, women in ministry, terrorism, and a special emphasis on civil rights. In one hour. We do it, and it's great fun!

I almost always start with this poem, "Two Worlds." It's one of my oldest poems and probably the most copied and recited use of all my poems. It was based on a true story about my father and me on a trip we took from Bangor, Maine, to Florida in 1952. It was before the civil rights movement, back when the rules were different north and south of the Mason-Dixon line. So here's what happened:

### Two Worlds

*I first saw it riding the bus  
from Maine to Florida  
my Dad and me and the guy in the uniform,  
representing U.S.*

*He was handsome and crisp and khaki,  
older brother, hero and friendly,  
willing to talk to a little kid,  
being nice to me.  
Until Washington, D.C.*

*Then my soldier friend had to go to the back.  
I didn't understand, I was five.  
I hadn't noticed:  
he was black.*

*Two worlds.*

That was my introduction to injustice, to racism. When you're 5 years old living in rural Maine, life is pretty good. I didn't know about mean folks and prejudices; I didn't know that some things aren't fair, some people aren't nice. That was my introduction to race. The idea that some people are different from you, that you shouldn't have anything to do with them, turn your back on them, stay away from them. They're not just different; they're less. That's what some people on the bus seemed to think.

This issue, this problem, from slavery to racism, has been called "America's original sin." But it's hardly original with America! The idea that one group is better than another, better smart, better looking, better holy; that one group by design should "Lord" it over another group; that one group is better suited for leadership or ownership. This thinking has been around forever. Go back to Biblical times, ancient times, even in our Scriptures, the folks across the river, the folks on the other side of the mountain, are always expendable.

Slavery is as old as history itself, the idea that some group with the wrong color, the wrong culture, the wrong God is better suited to picking cotton, or building the pyramids, or pulling the oars of the old slave ships of ancient Rome. It's universal.

Biblical Christianity enters that kind of thinking and wants to destroy it. Notice I said. "Biblical Christianity," not "historical Christianity." "Historical Christianity" has been complicit in slavery and racism. When the high school students come here, and I have to talk about Protestantism and civil rights, I tell them that the whole civil rights issue is about Protestantism. For the most part, Protestants were the ones who captured the slaves. Protestants ran the ships that transported the slaves. Protestants sold the slaves. Protestants bought the slaves and made the slaves become Protestants.

Protestants led to the abolitionist movement to abolish slavery. And, Protestants fought for the Confederacy to keep slavery. The Ku Klux Klan was almost 100 percent Protestant.

And when the civil rights movement began, it was led by Protestants, organized by Protestants; the churches they met in were Protestant, the hymns they sang were Protestant. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and most of the giants of the civil rights era were Protestant pastors.

In other words, historic Christianity had both its feet firmly planted on both sides of slavery and racism. We were right and we were wrong. We were the oppressor and the oppressed. We fought for justice and injustice. We were the lyncher and the lynched. But Biblical Christianity, the Christianity rooted in the Bible, wanted to change all that.

St. Paul declared, "You are all children of God through Christ Jesus ... there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28)

That is radical, revolutionary, upset-the-apple-cart, turn-the-world-upside-down kind of thinking. It's a beginning. In here, St. Paul says, in here, you become a follower of Christ, you join a church. You walk into this place, and you enter a whole new world. No differences that matter. No hierarchy. No assumptions. No prejudices. No top and bottom. No greater or lesser. We can't dictate the outside world. We can try to change it, fix it, teach it, impact it. But beyond these walls, the world still gets to do its own thing, good and bad. Bigots. Anti-Semites. Racists. Haters. All around us. Even now. Four synagogues burned this week in New Jersey, a little girl's black doll hung in effigy at a workplace. Bullied children committing suicide. All this week in our own little corner of the world.

We can't fix it all out there; we can't "govern" it all out there. But we're supposed to start in here. In here, "in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave nor free, no male, no female. For we are one in Christ Jesus"

Think how amazing that is, especially in the world 2,000 years ago. To be Jew or Greek was a monumental difference. To be a Jew meant something to just themselves. To be Greek meant something to the world. To be a Jew was to be of the Chosen People. To be Greek was to be over the hill. To be a Jew was to be Roman property. To be Greek was to be a Roman citizen. Each with plenty of reason to despise the other. But not in Christ's church.

To be slave or free was all the difference in the world. Owner or owned. Free or not free. Object or person. Each with plenty of reason to keep his or her distance. But not in Christ's church. To be male or female was absolutely the clearest demarcation of in and out, important, not important; it determined who got respected and who got used; who was inherently good, and who wasn't, who had value, and who didn't. But not in Christ's church.

St. Paul, the prime architect of the Christian church as an institution, set it up to be a place of perfect peace in Christ. Oneness in Christ. That was the plan. It didn't happen. The church that was neither male nor female told the females to be quiet in church and created an-all male clergy. The church that was neither slave nor free created a top-down hierarchy, elevated monarchs, subjected serfs, rationalized slavery, and institutionalized patronage. The church that was neither Jew nor Greek set Jews up to be the number-one scapegoat in the universe and split itself asunder into a thousand competing camps. We blew it. And 2,000 years later, we finally get it: racism hurts us all.

Stories about racism are easy and cheap to come by, and especially easy to point out in others. We Northerners have always been smug about it. Racism and slavery and lynching and all the worst images of the civil rights movement ... all in the South. Birmingham. Selma. Mississippi. George Wallace. Lester Maddox. The White Citizens' Council. All Southern. Even my new book, *My Habitat for Humanity*, features some powerful stories of racism from my experience in rural Georgia, Mississippi, and Kansas City.

But let's come closer to home, real close. My grandfather, whom I revered, was a church pastor for over 70 years. According to rumor, he was a very wild young man, but he began his road to conversion through the KKK. Way, way up in rural Maine. *Rural Maine*. As a child I remember our house in an uproar early one morning, my father rushing down the street a couple of blocks away to where a cross had been burned on the lawn of a house sold to a black family. In Queens, New York City.

At college, I thought I'd found heaven, Colgate University. Perhaps the most bucolic college in America. Unless you are black or Jewish. In my freshman year I learned that during fraternity rush, no blacks allowed here, no Jews allowed there. My senior year, just after Dr. King was murdered, some black students were walking down Fraternity Row. Shots rang out, fired at them from a fraternity house. That was the end of peace at my Colgate. Upstate New York.

And there are the skinhead Nazis in Connecticut, even showing up to intimidate the Jews lighting the menorah in downtown Fairfield two years ago.

But have things changed? Gotten better? Yes, dramatically. And in our lifetimes. Laws have changed. Attitudes have changed. People have changed. The much-maligned federal government, the much-maligned judicial branch, the much-maligned military led the way. Society followed, churches, businesses, people followed begrudgingly, haltingly. But we have changed. Sometimes not fast enough.

When I think back over my pastoral career, the worst memory of my career was all about race. A dying lady had ostracized her daughter for marrying a black man. On her deathbed, she wanted to be reunited. My job was to make it happen. It was too late. When she was probably 50 and healthy and full of sass and self-importance, it was an insult to her for her daughter to step outside her clan and marry a black man. So, with great dramatic flair and self-righteousness, she turned her back on her daughter, boycotted the wedding, never acknowledged the marriage, never met her grandchildren. Disowned them all. Now, near 80, shrinking and decaying on her deathbed, about to meet her maker, she wanted to make amends, make nice, hugs and kisses all around. It was too late. She had taught her daughter well, how to turn her back and walk away.

Out there it can be like that. In here we say it's different. That's the deal. I tell a story in my book that is instructional. Habitat for Humanity began in the central African nation of Zaire, now called Congo. The project was in a lovely village on a picturesque lake, where we successfully built houses for many people in the village for several years. Living just outside the village were pygmy families living in squalor.

Pygmies, shorter everybody else, are different, historically mistreated, abused almost as slaves by the more dominant taller tribes. It seemed obvious that they needed the simple, decent, safe houses that were the Habitat trademark that all the other villagers were getting. So we started building houses for pygmies in the village. But the other villagers refused, the workers did a work stoppage, nobody wanted a pygmy living next door.

Well, Habitat agreed. Nobody should be forced to live next to a pygmy. Nobody should be forced to be nice or neighborly or Christian. We agreed. So our Habitat staff closed down the project, started to pack up, got ready to leave. The villagers had the right to be bigoted, unkind. But we didn't have to participate in it. But then something happened. Once the villagers saw we were serious, we were leaving, suddenly the loss of jobs, the loss of

business and trade and even status, plus no houses for the rest of the tall villagers, it all sank in. And they agreed to have pygmies live next door.

The church needs to be like that. Out there, there can be meanness, rudeness, and all the various negative "isms," racism, sexism, nasty-ism. But not here. Here there is no Jew, no Greek. No slave, no free, no male, no female, no power, no weakness, no up or down.

And so I close with one of the strangest stories in the Bible, certainly the strangest, most unsettling story about Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus went up on the Lebanese border, looking for a little quiet. Instead he gets interrupted by a very aggressive, pushy, needy woman whose daughter was demon possessed. "She begged," this is what the Bible says, "she begged Jesus" to help her daughter. The Bible also says this aggressive, pushy woman up on the Lebanese border was a Greek from Syrian Phoenicia.

The late great entertainer, Sammy Davis, used to say he was a black, one-eyed, Jew, all true. Three reasons to dismiss him, three mountains to climb, three obstacles to hurdle over.

This woman up on the Lebanese border had at least as many strikes against her. She was a woman. She was pushy. She was a foreigner. She was a pagan. She wasn't Jewish or Israeli. She was 0 for 5 or 6. And Jesus, to our utter horror, treated her that way!

The Bible says the woman begs Jesus for help, and Jesus said — listen to this — "It is not right to give the children's bread to dogs." He was saying that his job was to reach his own people, the Jews, the Israelites, children of God. He had food for them ... not for the likes of her. Not for Lebanese/Syrian/Greek female pagans. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy. Infidels. Let's not sugarcoat it: Jesus called her a dog.

Here is the poem I wrote about the story from the perspective of the pushy, pagan, female foreigner:

God's Dog  
(Mark 7:25-30)

*He called me a dog.  
People say  
dog  
is God  
spelled backwards  
then pause*

*like that's so deep  
some fathomable mystery  
to soften my misery*

*but it hurts  
I don't care what higher purpose  
lurks  
beneath the curse  
it hurts  
to be called  
a dog,  
by God*

*but I do not yield  
this dog will not be heeled  
by God or anyone  
I surprise myself, and him  
I claw my way back  
to human  
my bark is sharp  
"I am able"  
said I to the Master  
"to eat crumbs from your table."*

Did the woman slap Jesus in the face? No, she didn't. Did she walk away, broken-hearted, dispirited? No, she didn't. She looked Jesus right in the eye and said, "Yes, Lord ... but even the dogs under the table can eat the children's crumbs." Pretty doggone amazing reply! And then Jesus healed her daughter.

Was Jesus a racist? A bigot? Sexist? Male chauvinist pig? Rude and crude? No, I think Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. Using himself as the bad guy, he set himself up, once and for all to show how ugly racism is. It's as though Jesus was shouting to the world, "Stop it! Stop it! Women aren't dogs. Foreigners aren't dogs. Unbelievers aren't dogs. Dogs are dogs. And by the way, be nice to dogs, too!"

And if you don't believe my take on the story, then you're left with this: Jesus got his comeuppance; Jesus got put in his place. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, got shown firsthand: racism is ugly. Whether you believe Jesus is the hero of the story or the villain, the outcome is the same. Racism is ugly.

That story lays the groundwork for Christianity's revolution that there is no room for that kind of thinking, that kind of behavior in here, in the church. This place, God's place, is hate-free, ism-free, mean-free.

I don't often Google, but yesterday, I Googled "racism," and I found two quotes that go together perfectly. The great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel said, "Racism is man's greatest threat to man — the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason." That's a good philosophical point, but the next one is even stronger. It's based on us, our religion, our faith, our God. Friedrich Otto Hertz wrote, "At the heart of racism is the religious idea that God made a mistake when he brought some people into being." In other words, racism is a mockery of God. Racism is heresy, blasphemy.

What Christianity does, Biblical Christianity, is to ask us to see people the way God sees people, each one made in God's own image. That would be the end of racism.