

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 14, 2012
Sermon Title: Jesus's Wife
Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:10; Isaiah 62:3; Revelation 21:2
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

He sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye ... You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God ... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

"Jesus's Wife." What a cheap trick, trying to be trendy with a sermon title. You have probably heard about the little piece of papyrus that's been found that may include the words "Jesus" and "wife." I love the cartoon that I showed to our "Religion in the News" group a couple of weeks ago. It shows Jesus walking on water, and his wife yells after him, "While you're out, get some milk!"

Now, to be clear, the Bible is silent on the subject. It doesn't say Jesus wasn't married; it doesn't say he was. And for a lot of Christians it doesn't matter. *The Da Vinci Code* made a big deal of it. It said Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child, and the premise of the book is if that were true, it would shake the foundations of the Christian church. I don't think so. I think it's fun to imagine Jesus changing diapers, coaching Little League, attending parent-teacher conferences.

At any rate, the papyrus proves nothing. It's supposed to be from around 300 or 400 A.D., so it's being tested for authenticity: are the words, the ink, or papyrus themselves authentically from that era? People – scholars, religious leaders – have already stepped into the debate, including the reminder that "The Church," the church universal, even our church, is described as the "Bride of Christ." Theologically, ecclesiastically, we are the wife!

So that's a cheap trick I played on you today, I grab your attention with a little bit of religious scandal/dark/controversy and then pull the old "bait and

switch." You're stuck listening to a sermon about "Church." Not only that, it's mid-October, there's frost in the air, the leaves are changing color, so it must be time for the church's annual pledge drive, our stewardship campaign.

And you're stuck here for another 20 minutes! But if I'm right, I won't have to talk much about money. If I can convince you that the church is the "Bride of Christ," that the church is dear to God, that the church is in a committed, personal, one-on-one relationship with Christ, then you'll know the need to keep this church strong. I won't have to beg. We won't have to hound you. You'll believe the urgency.

I got a phone call a last week from a young man who was in my youth group in 1975. He called to tell me that the church I pastored in a little town in upstate New York had just voted to go out of business, to shut its doors, to sell. They were dead. One hundred fifty years down the drain. My own sweat and tears down the drain. I went there a year out of seminary. My job was to merge an old Baptist church with an old Presbyterian Church, to breathe new life, and we did. We built it up. We had a thriving little church. We paid our bills, we had a good ministry, we reached out, we made a mark. Now it's dead.

Next Sunday, I won't be here. Another church I served, in Forest Hills, Queens, is having its 100th anniversary, and I'll be taking part. The church is actually in Forest Hills Gardens, a private community in the heart of the city, very much the Greenfield Hill of Queens, is even a historic district. The community and the church were both founded by Mrs. Russell Sage, the visionary philanthropic wife of a famous "robber baron," as some people called him. She had a vision for genteel, country-like community AND a church serving Christians of all types a century ago. And yet, here we are, 100 years later, and that historic landmark church is having a hard time getting permission to hold an outdoor service on historic landmark property.

Two churches from my little career, both facing very real 21st-century issues. One is dead; the other is forgotten. One has lost its vision; the other has lost its place. One was broken apart by its own divisions and apathy; the other is being isolated by secularism.

In September, *The New York Times* had a fascinating three-page spread of "A History of New York in 50 Objects." "Fifty objects," it said, that ... "embody the narrative of New York." It began in the year 11,000 B.C. with a mastodon tusk, but it mostly covered 1626 to now. Fifty objects, 50 things, 50 places that are central to the story of New York. Not one church. There was a beer keg, a horse's tail, a second-floor balcony on Wall Street, a

Singer sewing machine, a Brooklyn Bridge toll ticket, a World Series banner, a Checker taxicab, a Levittown house, ticker tape, Leonard Bernstein's baton, a MetroCard, and one of those ubiquitous Greek coffee cups. But not one church. In a city of 8 million people with 400 years of history, not one church has so moved the city that it could be recognized. (Roberts, Sam. "A History of New York in 50 Objects." *New York Times* 31 Aug. 2012. Print.)

Now, maybe they didn't want to offend anybody, picking one church over another, one religion over another. Which says something about the reputation of religion, our conflicts and divisions. Our acrimony is so bad, no one dared list us. Or, our footprint is so shallow, no one noticed us. Either way, it's bad news for the church. Beaten out by boom boxes and bagels.

And then there was this week's headline story, "U.S. Protestants Lose Majority Status." After 400 years of dominating the religious landscape, Protestants now stand at 49 percent of the population. Having mostly founded America, we've now lost it. I know, that's hyperbole, but it's a great sentence, "Having mostly founded America, we've now lost it." Maybe it would be better to say nobody can find it. Or, nobody cares. (Zoll, Rachel. "U.S. Protestants Lose Majority Status." *Boston Globe* 9 Oct. 2012. Print)

Now, believe me, this is no "doom and gloom" sermon. I'm actually very positive and upbeat about our church. I'm just trying to warn you that churches die, churches decline, churches get forgotten, churches close, churches get turned into restaurants and houses or museums or get torn down. Enough nastiness, enough apathy, we are done.

I once bought a cactus, because I thought cactuses were tough, independent, didn't need much. Guess what! My cactus died. It turns out, like everything else, it needed attention, it needed nutrition, it needed involvement. Just like a church.

I went down to Philadelphia late this week to Bryn Mawr College to catch two of Brigitta's field hockey games. On Friday, while sitting in the college library working on this sermon, Alida called me from the church office. She said those verses of Scripture I chose for today are a little weird. And that's good, it means you won't forget! All three verses are about the church, even the two Old Testament verses. All three are talking about people who choose to be in a unique, committed, covenantal relationship with God. It can be Israel; it can be the Chosen People. It can be the "remnant." It can be the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, the Wife of Christ. It can be the Church. The promises are there for us if we choose to accept them and live up to them.

The church is the Alex Rodriguez of religion. We can be known and remembered as the greatest home run hitter of all time, or we can be known and remembered as the biggest bust, the biggest over-the-hill has-been in Yankee history. The greatest clutch hitter or choke artist? Both are true at one time or another. For Rodriguez, and for the church.

Let's look at the verses again and make it personal to us, to our little church on top of the hill. "In a desert land, God found us. God shielded us and cared for us. God guarded us as the apple of his eye." (Deuteronomy 32:10). "We are the crown of splendor in God's hands, the Royal diadem in the hand of God." (Isaiah 62:3) "We are the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband." (Revelation 21:2) Which means we're pretty special. Very special.

We've all known people who don't take good care of stuff. They don't take good care of themselves or their kids or their property. Last week there was a huge ad in the *Connecticut Post*. It featured a house, dilapidated, overgrown, dirty. The ad was paid for by neighbors who are fed up. The derelict house reflected badly on the derelict owner and reflected badly on the community. A church that is derelict also reflects badly on its owners. That's not us. We are NOT derelict.

The church funds a Vacation Bible School and an all-year thriving Sunday School for 150 kids. The church sends 200 people to Appalachia every year. This church spends \$120,000 a year, personally, directly helping the poor and needy. This church employs us to go to the hospitals, to go into nursing homes to be with the sick and the dying, to be in the middle of crises and trouble ... AND to share in all the joys of your lives.

When you see the church budget, you'll see line items like salaries, administration, utilities, maintenance, programs. That makes sense, corporate-wise, accounting-wise. We can't really bill out being on the front lines of faith, dishing out love, sharing God, keeping hope alive, wiping away tears, shouting encouragement – not to mention nudging, cajoling, teaching, exhorting, reminding, refueling, recharging, standing up, standing out, standing in – all done with one eye steady on Christ.

This church is NOT derelict. We have repaired our roof, patched our walls, restored our windows, just as surely as we repair the brokenness of lives, patch the cracks in our hearts, and restore the windows that let in both the world's hurt AND all its beauty. This is a church.

The New York Times has a weekly Sunday feature called "Sunday Routine," a cute little column on what interesting New Yorkers do with their Sunday mornings. Most of it, almost all of it has to do with making coffee, finding the right place for brunch, and a good cardio workout. But not church.

In our fall Bible study, we are having a great time looking at the Gospel of Mark. My favorite Gospel, it's a great story. Jesus is "up and at 'em" from the opening verses, talking, inviting, helping, telling, healing, pushing. He was taking an old, old historic religion that had grown a bit rigid, lethargic, routine, disengaged, hard. Day by day, he reminded them of God's promise, that they were "the apple of God eye," they were "the crown of splendor in God's hand," they were "the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, the bride dressed" for the best day of her life. He lifted their sights. He challenged their perception. He dared them to be church in the best sense of the word, a community of love without limit.

I once had a nice car, and after a while, it ran rough. Rough and rougher, breaking down, sounding bad. People noticed. Finally, I took it to the mechanic. He said, "You ever heard of oil?" I said, "Sure." He says, "No, I mean have you ever heard of putting oil in it?" I said, "No." Sad to say, the mechanic was a member of my church, and he said to me, "You know, if we treat our church the way you treat your car, we're all in trouble."

You're the folks who put the oil in the car. Your dedication, your efforts, your pledge, your time, your offerings, your presence, your kids, your faith, that's the oil they keeps this whole place humming along.

Thank you for being church.