

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 28, 2012  
Sermon Title: The Power of None: Mission in a World  
of Infidels  
Scripture: Mark 4:1-9  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Mark 4:2-9

*He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'*

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Forget the sermon title: "The Power of None: Mission in a World of Infidels." I was going to look at this new report that said 20 percent of Americans now claim no religious affiliation and then tie that into this whole idea of "infidels," that every religion looks at every other religion as some kind of infidel, which means "unbeliever." To some degree, everybody seems to think that everybody else isn't quite up to snuff, spiritually. So with more people claiming no religion, and most people looking down their noses at everybody else's religion, how do we "do" mission? Interesting stuff, but for some other time. Today's sermon is still about mission, but in a different way.

A long time ago, I got on a plane to Zaire in Central Africa, now called Democratic Republic of the Congo. We landed in Kinshasa, the teeming capital of Zaire, ruled by a megalomaniac dictator, Mobutu.

That was my introduction to "World Mission," the idea of showing God's love to the whole world. I met some amazing people doing extraordinary work in miraculous ways. The missionaries were in the middle of nowhere, doing all

they could for people considered nobodies, who by most standards had nothing. But in the middle of all that nothing and nobodies and nowhere, the world of Christian mission was thriving by dugout canoe and Land Rovers and bicycles, on foot or in tiny airplanes, these missionaries brought tangible evidence of God's love into every nook and cranny of a deeply troubled land. I was hooked. I knew then that any church in America worth its salt needed to be involved with mission.

I hate to fly. And I hate Indian food. But I love "World Mission." With that paradox in mind, I fly off to India tonight, 17 hours of life as a human sardine, followed by two weeks of Lipton Cup-a-Soup, only to return as a slightly thinner sardine. It's what happens in between that I love, what we call "Mission."

"Mission" only means "purpose." The Navy SEALs who went after Osama bin Laden were "on a mission." The New York City businessman who just gave \$100 million for the care of Central Park is "fulfilling a mission." Most businesses have a "mission statement," a clear statement of purpose. Within the world of Christianity, the word "mission" refers to extending the benefits of Christian faith to people outside our front door.

"Home mission" is what we do in America. "Foreign mission" is what we do outside America. Historically and practically, that has meant sending people and money to faraway places. To do good things in the name of Jesus Christ, on behalf of Jesus Christ, motivated by our love for Jesus Christ, in their desire to follow Jesus Christ. That's about as neat a summary of Christian World Mission as you can get.

Now, the fact is mission has been done splendidly, heroically, lovingly. And it's been done poorly, selfishly, and ugly. It's been done good and bad by good people and bad people with good motives and bad motives. It's been done with astounding and miraculous success. It's been done with abysmal embarrassing failure. It's been done with lousy people who did great work, and with great people who did lousy work. Truth is, Christian mission is no different from being a plumber or a baker. There are lazy plumbers who do shoddy work. There are good plumbers who save the day. There are bakeries where everything tastes like Crisco and bakeries where everything is a taste of heaven. Same with mission work.

So if it's such a crapshoot, why do it? Well, we do mission because

- A. We're supposed to.
- B. People need it.
- C. When it's good, it's really, really good.

Let me get this "supposed to" part out of the way, because if we don't believe that, that's the end of the sermon. Jesus's last sentence on earth, his "last will and testament," was "Go ye into all the world baptizing and teaching ... into all the world to the ends of the earth."

And by the way, that idea is not unique to Jesus. The Book of Jonah – you know, "Jonah and the Whale," that book of Jonah – revolutionized religion. God told Jonah to go to a foreign country, an enemy country, a hated country, and bring a message of God's hope. That was radical, revolutionary, unheard of. The thinking in those days was, "Hey, this God is my God, and my God is for my people and my country and nobody else." And if you know the story of Jonah, you remember that Jonah didn't like the idea of "mission," Jonah didn't want his time and his money to cross any border. "Charity begins at home ... and stays at home." So Jonah hops on a boat planning to escape from God because, he thought, God doesn't cross borders.

So Jonah went elsewhere, hoping to end up nowhere, only to discover that God is everywhere. *God is everywhere*. God is in hated countries, foreign countries, enemy countries, faraway countries, strange countries, different countries. And again, if you know the story, Jonah ends up in the belly of a whale and discovers God is there too! Deep down in the sea at death's dark door, in the belly of a whale, God is there. At which point John has a change of heart and decides "to go ye into all the world ..." "to the ends of the earth ..." "to love his neighbor as much as he loved himself," even to "love his enemies."

Jonah was a Christian missionary, and he didn't even know it. Jonah was one of those lousy people who ended up doing great work "because we're supposed to." And people need our great work. I don't think you'll dispute me if I say the world is full of chaos, meanness, greed, tyranny, oppression, fear, hurt, hate, and just plain evil. The world needs help.

When I first went to India in 1983, Rotary Club had just decided that the world was too full of polio, too much polio. So they decided to fight it tooth and nail. In 2011 for the first time, India, 1.2 billion people, one-fifth of the world, reported not one single new case of polio. Rotary took at an ugly, hurtful, sad, destructive side of life and said, "That's unacceptable. How can I be a Rotarian, a service club member and let that happen?" So they stopped it. With money and people. It was their mission.

Well, O.K., we look at the world and we also see crippling disease, meanness, oppression, hurt, hate, evil. And we say, "That's unacceptable. How can I be a Christian and let that happen?" And so we "go into all the

world, to the ends of the earth teaching all the Jesus taught." And it's good stuff. Is it easy? Are there scoundrels everywhere? Nope and Yep. Nope, it's not easy. Yep, there are scoundrels everywhere. In my mission work, I've been threatened, beaten, jailed, ripped off, slandered, cheated, lied to, and lied about.

So why am I flying out of here Sunday night? Well, that's where our Scripture lesson comes in. I thought long and hard about which Scripture to use today. There are certain classic pro-mission verses that just hit you over the head and tell you, "David's right. Mission's important. Give money."

When I first started getting involved in mission, it was still viewed as exotic and heroic and Biblical, as though I was a cross between Daniel walking into the lions' den and St. Paul being beckoned in a vision to go to Asia and help.

In those early days, when I was headed off to Africa and other beleaguered places on earth, the church would hold a special "sending-off" service, and the first Sunday I got back, the church would give me a standing ovation.

There are verses that would fit into that kind of heroism. But I've been at it a long time now, and so has this church. We're more pragmatic now. More real, more rooted. So I picked a more "rooted" Scripture, "The Parable of the Sower," the very same Scripture we studied this week in our church's Bible Study. It's a simple, basic story. Jesus tells about a farmer scattering his seed the old-fashioned way, reaching into his bag, pulling out a handful of seeds, swinging his arm in a high arc while walking his fields, tossing the seeds up in the air, left and right.

Some seeds fell along the footpath, the ground beaten hard by years of travel. The seeds just land there. Nothing happens. No germination, no taking root. Nothing. No results. No crop. Wasted effort.

Some seeds fall along rocky ground. There's a little soil, but not much. The seeds spring to life quickly, and then shrivel up just as quickly. No chance to take root, be nourished. They died.

Some seeds fell along an overgrown field, lots of things already growing there. The soil is fine. But there are weeds and thorn bushes, everything competing and choking each other. No chance to thrive.

But then, you know what? Some seeds land just the right way. At just the right spot. The ground is soft. The land is clear. The roots are strong. The sun and rain come in good measure, and so, Jesus says, those seeds

produce a gigantic crop. A crop big enough to more than make up for every failure, every loss, every disappointment.

What an outstanding story! It is so perfect, so universal. It's about everything most of us try to do as parents, teachers, or coaches, as business leaders or in community service. It's about preaching, teaching, evangelism, mission. It's about anything important enough to us that we'd like to share it.

Whatever it is you'd like to impart to others, it's not easy to get through. People are resistant. Too busy. Hard-hearted. Hectic. Bitter. Cynical. Weary. Doubtful. Beaten down by life. Let down by others, even by religion. Burned out. That's what we're up against. We've got something wonderful to share, something precious, something perfect for the times. But people are hesitant to hear it, receive it, take it in.

There is an old missionary hymn,

*We've a story to tell to the nations  
That shall turn their hearts to the right,  
A story of truth and mercy,  
A story of peace and light,  
A story of peace and light!  
For the darkness shall turn to dawning,  
And the dawning to noonday bright.  
And Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,  
The kingdom of love and light.*

So you don't stop. You don't quit. You believe in your seeds, in your message, in your story, in your product, in your hope. You believe it is important. You believe others need it, want it, yearn for it. So you keep at it. Sure, there are rock-hard places and thorns and opposition and nastiness and disappointment and cold stares and scoundrels and pushback. But there are places and people so ready, so ripe, so fertile, so needy, so open, so desiring, that you just can't stop. It wouldn't be right.

I was wondering after all those years ... do I have favorite mission story? I've had so many great experiences. I've written about them, preached them. Is there a favorite, something that exemplifies mission? I once helped build 100 Habitat houses in a week in Mexico; that was pretty cool. I baptized 500 in a river in Africa; that was pretty cool. I fed hundreds of homeless living in the bowels of Grand Central Station; that was pretty cool.

I preached on top of a garbage dump in Chihuahua, in Spanish, to 1,000 garbage dwellers; that was pretty cool. I talked about Jesus with a voodoo priest in Haiti and a Hindu swami in India; that was pretty cool. I preached in a mosque in Bridgeport; that was pretty cool. I've dodged bullets, giraffes, baboons, water buffalo, and snakes; that was pretty cool.

But my favorite is this, and I'll be there in three days. In rural India in a remote area, we have homes for the aged. We take care of about 80 people, providing food, clothing, friendship, care, attention, affection, faith. Those old folks, they are the "thrown-away people." Nobody wants them. Nobody claims them. Nobody looks after them. Just us. There is no payback. In our medical work the sick get better. In our school our kids grow up and make something of themselves. There's payback. There are results. There is a better tomorrow, clearly. In our home for the aged and our feeding centers, there are just old, forgotten, unknown, tossed-aside, thrown-away people. And we love them as though they are our grandmothers.

It's simple, it's pure, it's basic, it's mission. And it's run by an old lady, a hunchback and a cripple. That's not appropriate language, I understand, but I wanted you to have an image in your mind. One woman is about 4 feet tall with a hunched back. Another woman lives on her haunches, in a permanent squat. That's how she gets around, working, cooking, washing, cleaning, serving. The other one is almost 80. Together, those three women just love.

That's how they take care of me. That's how they've cared for 100 visitors from our church through the years. That's how they take care of the elderly in their care. That's all they have to offer. Love. They take the money we give them, they buy rice, they mix in dal, stir it all up with love, and they create a miracle.

The old lady was a child bride, 70 years ago. Her husband died young, so she was a child and a widow. And 70 years ago, in rural India, that was it. She wasn't even to go outdoors ever again. Her life was over. But somehow, the story of Christ and Christ's love broke into her life, into her mud hut, into her family and culture and tradition, broke into her prison of sorrow and fear and superstition. And that love set her free. She has devoted the rest of her life to serving the poor.

And Jesus said, "Some seed fell on good soil and the seed took root, sprouted, and grew, and produced a crop 30 times, 60 times, 100 times what was planted." Then Jesus added, "Let those with ears listen."

This Greenfield Hill listens. Thank you.

Our final hymn expresses the hope for all we do –

“I Would Be True”

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;  
I would be pure, for there are those who care;  
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;  
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;  
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

*I would be friend of all—the foe, the friendless;  
I would be giving, and forget the gift;  
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;  
I would look up, and laugh, and love and lift.  
I would look up, and laugh, and love and lift.*