

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 20, 2013  
Sermon Title: America's Second Touch  
Scripture: Mark 8:22-25  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **Mark 8:22-26**

*They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*

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"People ... that look like trees, walking." Well, That's an interesting scripture lesson, isn't it? A blind man is brought to Jesus, the Bible tells us, so that Jesus would "touch him." That shows us there was some expectation, some hope that Jesus would change things, that Jesus would make a difference, that Jesus would change the status quo.

In that great old hymn, "Amazing Grace," we sing,

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see.*

The blind man's friends hoped that's what would happen for their friend, that he once was blind but now, after Jesus's touch, he would see.

We've been studying the Gospel of Mark at our weekly "Gathering." That's what we call our Bible discussions, "The Gathering," and a few weeks ago we talked about this very story. Jesus healed the blind man, but it takes two tries. First Jesus spits on the man's eyes.

(I think I was the only one not surprised by this. My mother always taught us if you're outdoors, away from home, maybe in a game or at the playground, and you cut yourself, you fall and scrape your knee or your arm, spit on it. Later, when you get home, wash it with soap, and then put Mercurchrome and a Band-Aid on it. But first, spit on it.)

Well, Jesus does that, and the initial result was encouraging, even miraculous! The guy really can see! It's fun to imagine the joy that moment! After a lifetime of darkness, after a lifetime of stumbling around or being led around, after a lifetime of no sunsets or flowering meadows and no bright colors, the world suddenly explodes before his very eyes! "What do you see?" Jesus asks. "I see people. They look like trees, walking." "Amazing!" the crowd shouts, "He once was blind but now can see!" "Wonderful ... a miracle!" people shouted, for sure.

This is as good as it gets. The blind man sees. The crowd is happy. And Jesus is a hero. Everybody is thrilled ... except Jesus. Jesus is frowning. "That's not good enough," he says under his breath, "that was NOT good enough. People are NOT trees, walking." And so Jesus gives the man a "second touch." He put his hands on the eyes a second time until, the Bible says, until the man could "see clearly."

"The second touch." That's not original with me. There was a great Christian book by that title years ago, and I bet half the preachers who have preached on this scripture titled their sermons "The Second Touch." I decided to use it today for my sermon, "America's Second Touch."

It's a holiday weekend. It's Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. The weekend that remembers America's struggle with what some have called "America's original sin": slavery, racism, and all its side effects and aftermath. The idea of "original sin" refers to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and their decision to disobey God, eat the apple, and warp their sexuality. So the people who believe in "original sin" argue that all the world's problems have their roots in that first "original" sin. When people refer to slavery as "America's original sin," they're making the same argument: that if you build a country based on a foundation of slavery, it's going to come back to haunt you for a long time in a million ways. "Unintended consequences," we call it.

Three hundred years ago someone tried to figure out how to harvest cotton cheaply. And rice. And sugar. And before you know it, you've got John Brown, the Civil War, Gettysburg, the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow, lynchings, civil rights, Freedom Rides, Brown vs. the Board of Education, Dr. King,

Medgar Evers, affirmative action, school busing, "stop and frisk," "redlining," inner-city schools, and 100 other unintended consequences.

And what do we have at the start of 2013? Talk of "secession" and "nullification," states wanting to destroy America, two highly charged words left over from the bloody Civil War, when Americans slaughtered one another, trying to decide who should be free. Or, in the language of today's scripture, trying to decide whether some people are just "trees, walking," or whether we should really open our eyes and see clearly. That's the "America's Second Touch" I'm talking about.

Most everyone in church this morning has been around long enough to know a lot has changed in our lifetime. A lot has improved; we know that. And we're grateful for that. We also know that racism is not the only "ism" that bedevils our world today. There are lots of ways that people hurt other people. Devalue, diminish, break other people.

Most of us, I'm sure, have had some experience of prejudice, bias, of being excluded, kept out, hands off, arm's length; of being not wanted, not accepted, not valued. We felt like trees, walking.

We also know that our hands aren't clean. We used to think that slavery and racism were products of the old Confederacy, the South. Instead, we've learned that we are all complicit in some way. The North profited from slavery, and we Northerners, we New Englanders practiced our own prejudices in our own ways. And as Christians we are startled to realize that slavery in America was almost entirely a Christian issue.

Every year, Fairfield Warde High School brings history students to our church and three or four other religious places. Each May I'm given an hour to explain Protestantism, Congregationalism, and our particular church's take on war, terrorism, homosexuality, women in the clergy, and civil rights. When I do the "civil rights" section, I tell them bluntly, the whole thing is almost entirely Protestant.

Protestants stole the slaves.

Protestants sold the slaves.

Protestants bought the slaves.

The slaves became Protestants.

Protestants started the Abolitionist Movement.

Protestants fought against the abolitionist movement.

Protestants were the Ku Klux Klan.

Protestants led the civil rights movement.

Protestants opposed civil rights.

Protestant hymns were the music of civil rights.  
Protestant churches were the meeting places.  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Protestant minister.

We know that story, good and bad, inside and out because we lived it. We were the heroes, the victims, and the villains. So we, better than most, should value the hope of Jesus's "second touch." We, better than most, should know the work is NOT finished.

May I be blunt? A church like ours is full of successful people. And we didn't get to be successful by settling for halfway measures. We go all out. And the things we are proud of in America — we got there by going all out. And the things we believe in — we want to go all out. No one sits back and says, "Gee, we've made wonderful progress on cancer, that's good enough; let's slow down now and pull back." No! We're full speed ahead against cancer. Our church people are deeply involved in Jeff Keith's Connecticut Challenge, in the Rose of Hope luncheon, in the Relay for Life event. Why? Because we're not done yet.

Indeed, the whole purpose behind Jeff's Connecticut Challenge "survivorship" is that you can't declare premature victory over cancer, that even when you have beaten the disease and the tumor is gone and the bad cells are eliminated, the aftermath of cancer and its treatments are with you forever, so don't ignore it, don't minimize it.

Racism is a cancer. As a nation we've treated it. Tumors have been removed. Bad cells have been eradicated. But the after effects, the side effects, the impact and trauma, even lingering fears and attitudes, are very much with us.

We are not done. Things that divide us are still around. So let's bring the same spirit to this challenge that you and I bring to every other challenge we face. In your business, and your family life, around town, even on the golf course, no one is saying, "I think I'll slack off now, back away, stop trying, give it my half best, aim for mediocrity, settle for less." No. We are constantly going back to the drawing board, reworking reimagining redesigning. We want to win. We want to excel. We want to finish the job. We need to finish the job on prejudices of every type. And I think the story of Jesus's "second touch" gives us the way to go. We need to see people as people, clearly, not as "trees, walking."

I told the story at "The Gathering" a couple weeks ago that I don't think I've ever told you before. It's not in any of my books, which is interesting

because my *My Habitat for Humanity* book is a full of stories about overcoming differences and racism and all the things that divide us.

As you know, I've been deeply involved in India for 30 years. But before India, I was deeply involved in Africa, and my first experience of Indians was in Africa, and it wasn't a good experience. I was on a mission trip to Africa. We had already been to Zaire, Uganda, Kenya, and we were on our way to Tanzania and Zambia. So we were given a little break at a resort in Mombasa on the Kenyan coast. We stayed at a lovely hotel run by Indians, and they took us on a tour of Mombasa. They drove us, helter-skelter, through all the African parts of town, the villages and the craft shops and the tourist spots. They drove fast and reckless with no thought for the Africans in the street, who were sent scurrying for safety and left eating our dust. Literally, no thought.

After several near misses, we actually did hit an African, but the van driver didn't stop. We were yelling and screaming, he still wouldn't stop. Finally, with a big laugh, he said, "I didn't hit any person. There was no person there." And I remember realizing at that very moment, he was telling the absolute truth. He did not see any person there. There was no person there to him. Black Africans were just trees, walking. And what are trees for? Trees are there for our pleasure, or to be cut down, made into charcoal or carved into trinkets for tourists. He didn't hit any person. He may have grazed a tree, walking. But there was no person there.

Jesus's "second touch" is the promise to see people clearly. Without prejudice. Without hang-ups. Without assumptions. Without baggage. Just people.

I was going to close this sermon with an obvious poem, "The Second Touch," from my book of poetry *Fieldstones of Faith* (it's printed at the end of this sermon), but instead I found an old poem I wrote ages ago in honor of my son. My son is a vegan idealist and for years he has argued, "There is no such thing as race. It's just a human construct."

So I wrote this poem, which begins,

*"There is no such thing as race,  
my son tells me.  
Face it, the world replies,  
Our storytellers were wise.  
Look through their eyes  
and see the case for race.  
Long ago, and it's true,*

*somebody didn't like my people  
and we didn't like you."*

*So for a stanza or two I made the case for race. Then, in the final stanza, I  
challenge all those divisions. I write,*

*"If God is one  
how many are we?  
From a simple source,  
how different can we be?  
Through the Creator's mind,  
What dare we see?  
Race is the excuse for evil choice  
defying the Christly voice  
that we live for the other  
truly sister, equally brother."*

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### **The Second Touch (Mark 8:22-25)**

*Jesus didn't get it right  
the first time  
(there's hope for me after all)  
in pursuit of perfection there was a shortfall.  
Jesus missed the mark, off course.  
Not entirely, of course  
it's enough to say  
he did all right, he did okay ...  
but okay is not the Messiah's way.*

*He meets a blind man  
spits on his eyes  
- no surprise -  
he brought forth his essence from deep within  
a gift of his spirit  
liquid wind  
a life surprised by light.  
Well done ...*

*from darkness to shadows should delight  
the eyes getting adjusted  
after a lifetime of night*

*the once blind man  
now can see!  
So what if people look like trees?  
There's shapes and color  
and movement so subtle  
that the branches of the people-trees  
bend gently to the breeze.  
Well done ...*

*but Jesus was not pleased,  
people are not trees.  
He loved them, no doubt, trees I mean  
after all, he died on one.  
Trees have their purpose, their place  
but in Jesus' case  
people are the apple of his eye  
the object of his desire  
that's why he is here  
and we are not trees.*

*Furthermore  
there is no treasure from a half-way measure  
no prize for half tries  
any job worth doing is worth doing right  
thus it's not darkness into shadows  
but darkness into light  
which calls for the second touch  
a mulligan, a do-over, a do it again  
doesn't require much  
just humility  
to confess our own frailty.*

*If Jesus is willing to start over again  
who are we to hold back  
from what we can become?!  
and one day to hear  
Well done, well done.*