

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 9, 2013
Sermon Title: Whither America?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scriptures: Matthew 7:24-29

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'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'
Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

"Whither America?" That's an old-fashioned sermon title, isn't it? With an old-fashioned word, "whither." In other words, where is America headed? What's the future? It's always tough preaching about America. It makes folks nervous. If I talk about "whither me?" What's my future, or even your future or this church's future, nobody would mind. But nowadays, with our nation so divided, and our civil discourse so uncivil, just mentioning "America" makes folks nervous. Of course, that's half the fun of being a public speaker, putting you on edge!

St. Paul had a very high opinion of preaching. He actually ties it to salvation. He says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call if they have not believed? And how can they believe if they have not heard? And how can they hear if someone doesn't preach?" (Romans 10:13-14)

So my job is to preach in such a way that you hear, and if it can put you on edge just a little bit, keep you awake, then it might be worthwhile! So ... "whither America?" What do you think? Two things led to this sermon. First, the other week we hosted a luncheon at the parsonage on this very theme, "Whither America?" It was another in our new ministry we call "Communal Table." Every couple of months, we issue an open invitation to any of you to come to our house, sit around one big table, our "communal table," have a little lunch, and talk. We usually have a hot topic. One was on "religion and politics"; another was "forgiveness"; and the last was about America. There's something about a table and eating that lowers the temperature, ups the fellowship, and leaves an impression.

Jesus did that many, many times. When he called Matthew to be a disciple, he sat down and had lunch with all of Matthew's friends and family. He did the same with Zacchaeus, a real scoundrel, but over the course of the meal, Zacchaeus was transformed. Jesus did it with the disciples. We actually call it "The Last Supper." We remember it in great detail probably because it all happened during supper. We don't call it "The Last Speech" or "The Last Foot Washing" or "The Last Holy Communion." All that stuff happened, but it is remembered as a supper. But it was supper that made it memorable!

Thursday night I was invited to a dinner at the Aspetuck Valley Country Club. We were in the Library, a private dining room, 15 men, with great food and drink, all gathered for conversation. Tom O'Hara had invited Bobby Hurley, Sr., to come up for dinner, and we just sat around talking for three hours. No speech. No lecture. Just a table, food, and conversation.

Bobby Hurley is America's most legendary high school basketball coach. He's in the Hall of Fame, almost 50 years coaching at the same struggling little inner-city Catholic school in Jersey City, facing all the issues of modern everyday life that we face right here in Fairfield. That probably surprised us — Jersey City and ... Fairfield ... alike? Why not? Kids are kids. Families are families. Hopes are hopes. Sorrows are sorrows. Problems are problems. And faith is still faith, whether you're in Jersey City or Fairfield.

What I liked about that night was that it proved once again the power of good conversation around a table. And it was optimistic. The room was full of energy and ideas and determination. It was a little slice of America. And it was good. Nobody was trying to impress. Or mock. Or put anyone down. Or score points. It left me feeling positive.

Coming into church today you were given your Sunday bulletin and an insert. On one side is the information we talked about earlier, about summer services and next week's special Father's Day services. If you turn it over,

you'll see the worksheet I used at our "communal table" discussion of America. At the top there's a scale from 1 to 10, and you just ask yourself, are you pessimistic or optimistic about America — #1 being super pessimistic and #10 being super optimistic. Where would you put yourself? I put myself at an 8. At our "communal table," I shared an article that Jay Lauf sent me. Jay is an editor at *The Atlantic*, and one of their articles was "How America Can Rise Again." The tile itself is both realistic and optimistic. It admits we could see some rising, and it declares we can! The article made several convincing points, but I'll mention just three:

First, be clear about our strengths. Know them. Name them. Use them. Believe in them

Second, just because you think politics is a mess, it doesn't mean America is a mess! The real America, the one with strength, the one people argue is so exceptional IS exceptional precisely because America is greater than politics or party or personalities.

Third, the author says, and this is key for this sermon today, "America has been strong because people built toward the future." We haven't been afraid of the future, we welcomed it, harnessed it, enjoyed it. We need to get back to that.

Now, looking at that bulletin insert again, in the middle I jotted down the big issues I think about when consider America and its future. It's just my list. There are some hot issues there. Guns, terrorism, politics. And by the way, let me know what your big issues would be. My assumption is that those are issues America needs to talk about, grapple with, think through, come to some resolution. The future is rarely about the status quo. The future is always about change. It might be change for the better or for the worse. But it's hardly ever the same.

Take cancer for example. Our community, these current weeks, is immersed in the future of cancer. Last night was the "Relay for Life." One thousand people, mostly young people, walking all night long in teams to raise funds to fight cancer. Next week is the inspiring "Rose of Hope" luncheon; people determined that the future of cancer be changed! In July, Jeff Keith's "Connecticut Challenge" will bring together over 1,000 people, from little kids to old folks, riding bikes for cancer survivors, for hope for their tomorrows — their future.

Why all this effort? Why not just say, "We've made good progress with cancer; the mortality rate is acceptable now! Let's stick with the status quo!" Instead, folks want the future to be better, so they're pushing for change.

You see my list there; you're already framing your own list in your own head that impacts the future of America. Pick any one of them. From my list, do you want the state of politics to be the same in five years as it is today? The economy? Healthcare? Or almost by definition, don't we hope for better in the future?

Which brings me to the verse of Scripture at the bottom of that handout: "Always be prepared to give the answer for the reason you have hope! But do this with gentleness and respect." I like that. It bears repeating: *Always be prepared to give the answer for the reason you have hope! But do this with gentleness and respect.*

That verse makes a pretty big assumption — that you are hopeful! St. Paul was writing to Christians and he was assuming that by definition as Christians, we are hopeful. He also assumes that that hopefulness is going to be obvious on your face, in your attitude, how you work and live. Your hopefulness, your optimism will be so obvious that people will ask you "What's up with you? How come you're always so positive? What's the reason for your hope?"

Then Paul assumes you actually want to convince others, not put them down, not mock them, not infuriate them. You want to convince them, you want them to move to your side, to be optimistic themselves, to be hopeful. So when you explain yourself, "Do it with gentleness and respect."

I mentioned that there were two reasons that led to today's sermon, the first being our "communal table" discussion about America. The second is that we are set to launch our own long-range planning for the future "vision" committee. What do we want to be as a church three years from now, five years, 20 years, 50 years? In 12 years, our church will be 300 years old. What should our church be like in the year 2025, and how do we get there? We could try arrogance or smugness. We could try hiding our head in the sand. We could try despair or whining or blaming. That's how a lot of churches face the future. Or we could try "building toward the future."

With the exception of this church, I've spent most of my life in churches that talked about "the good old days" in the way distant past. One church talked about when it had 3,000 members. One church had an old newspaper headline proclaiming it to be the wealthiest church of its kind in New England. Another used to get 1,000 people at its Sunday evening services; another once had 200 in its men's Sunday School class, and another 200 in its women's class. They boasted of their history, their architecture, their past, "the good old days."

When I'm wheeled across the stage in 2025 to celebrate our 300th anniversary, I don't want anyone pointing at me and talking about "the good old days." We need to be thinking about how to be a great church, a strong church, a healthy church, a faithful church, down the road, in the future.

To do that, we need to be hopeful. We need to "always be prepared to answer for the reason we have hope." And we need to face the world, our neighbors, our communities, our nation, face the world with "gentleness and respect." We need to believe in the future. We need to believe we should be part of that future. And we need to be prepared for that future. When Bob Dies and Mike Ruble, the chair of our Church Council, started thinking about this, we immediately reached out to Christian Crews, a young man in our church who actually is a "futurist," someone whose life's work is to prepare for the future. Christian embodies much of what I'm talking about today — change, hope, the future. He has a terrific motto: "Time doesn't create change. Change creates time!"

I like that. Much of the world is passive, just sitting by, watching time pass, allowing change to happen to them, and that would mostly be negative change. Christian suggests something proactive, intentional. "Change creates time." So work for change, create change, embrace change, make change work for you ... for us.

I was in a library this week, near the magazine rack, where two magazine cover stories caught my eye. *Foreign Affairs* asked, "Can American Be Fixed?" *The New York Review of Books* offered "Religion Without God." It was clear: America is in trouble. Christianity is in trouble. That's how some see it.

I'm going to close with a story I told 16 years ago, and I got in trouble for it, so I'm going to tell it again. I'll just keep telling it every 16 years.

This mother had two boys. One was very very pessimistic about everything; everything was negative. One was super optimistic, every day was a good day! She took the boys to a psychologist who wanted to observe them, so each boy was put in a separate room, each room filled high with horse manure. Horse manure! After an hour, the psychologist and the mother went to check on each boy. They opened the first door, and the little boy, the pessimist, was sitting in a corner holding his nose, whining, "It stinks in here!" Then they went to the other room with the eternal optimist little boy, and when they opened the door, they could barely see him. He was buried

deep in the stuff, digging and digging and scooping and scooping. The little boy said, "I just know with all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

That's my take on America and Greenfield Hill Church. We're the folks who believe in that pony.