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Date: August 24, 2014
Sermon Title: What If We Were Ferguson?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 4:16-21, 28-30

Luke 4:16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,*

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Luke 4:28-30

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jesus was a disruptive force, intentionally and unintentionally. For example, there are several accounts of Jesus going to the churches of the day and on each occasion he caused a scene. Many remember the Christmas story. Right after he was born, Jesus was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem (sort of the Greenfield Hill Church of Jerusalem). He was there for their version of our infant baptism; his parents were thanking God for his life. No sooner did

they walk into that church, than two old people ran up to the Holy Family announcing that that this little Baby Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of Israel. This was good news, shocking news, great news, but above all it was *news news*, the kind that grabbed attention, for sure.

And you know the story of when he was 12. Jesus sort of “ran away from home,” disappeared for three days, hanging out in the Temple with all the big religious leaders of the day, taking it all in, peppering them with questions, until his frantic parents burst into the room, grabbed Jesus, hugging him with relief and chastising him at the same time. That was an attention grabber.

Then, when Jesus started his ministry, one of the first things he did was to go back to his childhood church, sort of the Greenfield Hill Church of Nazareth, and as you heard in our Scripture lesson, he really shook things up. He gave them a vision for ministry that really would have turned that little country church upside down and inside out. He talked to them about finding the oppressed, the enslaved, the most vulnerable people around and setting them free. *That* got attention. People started applauding . . . until they thought about it, what it might mean, and then they chased him out of town.

Of course, in his most famous visit to church, Jesus literally shook everybody and everything he could get his hands on. The church of his day, the Temple, had turned into a business, a marketplace, a spiritual vending machine, with buyers and sellers and moneychangers and haggling. Jesus was just so fed up that he started tossing things around, turning stuff over, creating a genuine riot. Jesus was an outside agitator with a chip on his shoulder. He was angry and “disturbing the peace,” a real threat to law and order. A little later, he was killed. Yes, Jesus was a disruptive force. And we live in disruptive times. That got me to wondering: what would happen if Jesus’s kind of disruption met the world’s kind of disruption?

When I was in seminary, we would be given an assignment to preach on some Biblical character or Biblical event and to do it from the first-person perspective. So maybe I would preach on Jonah, but I would preach it *as* Jonah: “Once upon a time I was eaten by a whale, and that led me to reconsider my priorities.” That sort of thing. Or maybe I’d preach about Holy Week, and I would be a first-hand reporter as if I were right there in the Temple when Jesus walked up, all hyped up, and started throwing things and smashing things and shouting old-time slogans: “Good morning, this is David Rowe reporting from Jerusalem, where violence broke out near the Holy of Holies . . . a gang of men vandalized and looted the Temple.”

Think of the events of summer 2014: the immigration crisis along the Texas border. I preached about that, maybe six weeks ago; it seemed like a really big crisis at the time! Then there is the Ebola virus scare, with American missionary doctors stricken, flown to Atlanta for experimental treatment. Thank God they've survived. Then the killing of 19-year-old Michael Brown in little Ferguson, Missouri, and all of a sudden the Civil Rights struggles and the race riots of days gone by didn't seem gone by. Only seven days ago Alida preached about that, when we were all thinking *that* was a big crisis. And then on Tuesday, the demonic forces of ISIS killed that young American journalist, James Foley, boasting and bragging and threatening. All of a sudden, prominent voices are calling for more airstrikes, boots on the ground, all-out war, while warning of sleeper cells inside America.

So . . . what if? What if, instead of our being a pretty little almost-country church in a sleepy August New England . . . what if destiny or fate or birth or blind luck put us in Ferguson, Missouri; Mosul, Iraq; Monrovia, Liberia; or on the Texas border?

Imagination is a good thing. So I thought today I would ask us to imagine being some little church there instead of here. Because of the horrible news in those places, we forget that the people there are not that much different from us, the days there aren't that much different from ours. The news forces us to concentrate on the bad people doing bad deeds on bad days.

But before Michael Brown was killed, before ISIS conquered and slaughtered in Mosul, before the border towns were inundated with child immigrants fleeing Central America, before neighbors started dying of that mysterious Ebola virus, the day before all that, the week before, all those towns had churches just like ours. Little churches with good people going about their daily lives, trying to do the best they could. This week I've gone on the Web sites of Ferguson/St. Louis churches. It's easy enough to see what it was like the day before Michael Brown was killed. You see churches that were slowed down for summer, gearing up for fall, churches that are putting their best foot forward on Web sites and on Facebook, with photos of happy church members and dignified clergy doing nice things in pleasant surroundings.

And then . . . all heck broke loose. So what happens next? What if we . . . all of us right here . . . if we were the Greenfield Hill Church of Ferguson, Missouri? We don't even have to make Michael Brown or the police officer, Darren Wilson, members of our church. Ferguson is a small town. We would know people who knew Brown and Wilson. We would have some first responders in our church, a policeman or two, an EMT, a fireman, just as we do here. We would have a city councilor, elected official, probably be friends

with the mayor, just as we are here. Many of us would have shopped at the convenience store where Brown got the cigars before he was killed.

So that's our hometown, that's our church. Ferguson's Greenfield Hill Church. Wilson is our nearby neighbor in the nearby town. Michael Brown, he was our neighbor on our side of town. And in between is our pretty little church. Then we wake up one morning, and that young man has been killed by the other young man, and before we know it, there are protests and big armored vehicles and Molotov cocktails and police snipers and looters. And the governor is here and the National Guard and all those witnesses who didn't see the same thing. And we are supposed to be a church. What would we do? What would you want Alida and me to do? What would you expect? That's a tougher question, isn't it? The easier question is the popular one, "What would Jesus do? WWJD? *What would Jesus do?*"

Our Scripture lesson says that he would be in the middle of it. Right smack in the middle of it. Probably infuriating everybody. He certainly would have walked over to Michael Brown's house, he would have embraced Michael's mom and dad, and they would have felt something, just as the Bible says, they would have felt "virtue flow" from him into them. Virtue, power, sort of a spiritual electricity . . . they would have felt God right there in their living room.

And even before half of America got to praise him and half of America got to criticize him, I'll bet Jesus would have gone straight to that other town to Officer Williams's house, and he would have embraced him just as he did with Peter and Zacchaeus and the Roman Centurion and Legion, the demoniac. You see, Jesus didn't have friends and enemies, he didn't have good guys and bad guys, he didn't have right-wing and left-wing. Jesus had *people*, and when they were hurting, he was there. And I'll bet he would have stood in front of the riot police just as that young Chinese man did in Tiananmen Square when he stood in front of the tank. And when those young people in Ferguson threw all that stuff at the stores and broke the windows, vandalizing and looting, I'll bet they would see him standing there inside the store, looking at them with his sacred bleeding heart, before turning and starting to sweep up.

But that's what Jesus would do. He was God, after all, the Messiah, the Savior. He's expected to do the unexpected. But what would we do? We have to live there. That's our town. These are our neighbors. That's our church. It's our name, our reputation, our image on the line. What would we do?

I have to admit I'd get in the middle of it. It's our town, our people. When good or bad happens, it happens to us. We'd use our church as a resting place and a launching pad. We'd open the bathrooms, the kitchen, the parlor, and the sanctuary, and we'd walk out of the sanctuary into the streets and parks and stores of Ferguson. We would talk and pray, we would walk, we would greet our neighbors and strangers and police, we'd bring water and sandwiches, we'd take a stand, we'd make a difference, we'd brighten the mood, we would be neighborly and Christlike.

I teach a Bible class at The Watermark, the senior living center, and on Thursday there were about 30 people there. I asked them to help me with this sermon. I asked them to imagine that they live in Ferguson, Missouri, and they were my church. So what would they want our church to be doing? And within a blink of an eye, they had four suggestions:

One, get in the middle of it and calm things down.

Two, find out what was wrong in Ferguson and correct it.

Three, gather all the religious leaders together in one place, pastors and people, and work together to lead the town through the crisis.

Four, call for five minutes of silence and a prayer vigil right now, during the protests, get everybody to stop . . . listen . . . pray.

Interesting. Right off the bat, I've got to say that's better than anything I did. I mostly sat up here depressed like Little Jack Horner sitting in the corner, eating my Christmas pie, with nothing useful to do or say. And their four ideas were better than anything else that anybody suggested. Let me repeat it: Calm things down. Get folks together. Correct what's wrong. Stop and pray. Pretty good plan.

The common denominator is each step requires us to be in the middle of it. Not spectators. Not whiners. Not finger waggers. Not ostriches with our heads in the sand. Not Little Jack Horner sitting in the corner. Calming. Praying. Gathering. Correcting. In the middle.

That's Jesus's entire M.O., modus operandi, way of operating. Being in the middle. In Christianity we call it the "Incarnation," literally, "flesh in." In popular slang, we talk about "having some skin in the game." In other words, it's personal; you have some stake in it. It's important to you. That's what Jesus did. By incarnating, he put his skin in the game. He became human; he made our world personal to him. Our sorrow became his sorrow. Our rage became his rage. Our brokenness became his brokenness. He put himself right smack dab in the middle.

That's what those two American missionary doctors were doing in West Africa. That's how they got Ebola. Donald Trump criticized our government for bringing them home, showing two things at once: that he didn't understand Christianity and that he didn't understand America. We get in the middle.

Next Sunday I will invite you to take part in a memorial for James Foley, our young American journalist murdered by ISIS this week. As we leave church next week, we will give each of you an American flag to plant on our church lawn as our tribute to someone who chose to be in the middle. Jim Foley's parents wanted him to stay home. He'd already been captured once in Libya. They didn't want him to risk it all anymore, but he needed to go back. He wanted to be there, in the middle.

That's where the rubber meets the road. That's where the risks are. That's where you meet Jesus . . . and I mean that in every sense of the word: theoretically, spiritually, emotionally, personally, mortally . . . and immortally.

That's where you meet Jesus. Which, after all, is the purpose of church, whether in Ferguson, Missouri, or in Fairfield Connecticut.