

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: September 7, 2014
Sermon Title: Second Touch Ministry
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42; Mark 8:22-25

Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Mark 8:22-25

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.

(introduction)

You've started to catch the theme of the day. It's been an amazing summer at Greenfield Hill Church, one of the best we've ever had, and today we launch a whole new church year with great excitement. We're calling our theme "The Second Touch," based on the Scriptures that Jamilah and Rachel are reading today.

In Jamilah's Scripture, Jesus tells us that sometimes we have to dig deeper, go further, take risks more than we might expect. In everything in life,

absolutely everything, we can look at it at say, "O.K., this is what I need to do to get by, to pass, to be O.K., whether it's good enough." Jesus says, "Don't settle for that." In Rachel's Scripture, Jesus had to do something. He did it pretty well, but down deep he knew he could do better. So he did it a second time; he gave it a "second touch." You see, even Jesus knew there were times he could do more.

We shouldn't be shy about wanting to be better. "Self-improvement" is a multibillion-dollar business in America. Books, workout DVDs, gurus and yoga, a million variations of *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*. Everyone's trying to get better, to improve. All designed to help you improve your golf game, your physique, your bank account, your confidence, your career, your kids' SATs, and your retirement fund. Nobody wants to stand pat.

The *Connecticut Post* sports pages have been full of articles about the upcoming high school sports season. They evaluate every team in every sport, and every article asks the same question: Can they improve? Can they do better than last year? Can the great teams be even greater? Can the good teams become great? Can the poor teams become good? Prep football, Warde field hockey, Ludlowe soccer, individuals and teams . . . can this be the year for them?

The business pages carry on the same debate about business, the stock market, the economy. I drove up to Stonington on Friday to do a funeral, listening to the news on the radio all the way. From 7:30 to 8:29 AM, the reporters were giddy with excitement about the great jobs reports about to come in, how everything's improving, getting better, "Happy days are here again." Then 8:30 comes. The jobs report was announced, and it was less than they had expected. Now everybody was glum, with conversation quickly turning to what it takes . . . to improve. Good or bad, whatever the starting point is, we want better.

Well, This is a really good church. We've had a really good summer. Today is a really good day to launch the new church year. We have a really good starting point. This is the best time to believe that we can go that "second mile"; this is the best time to believe that we can invite God to touch us a "second time," taking us to a deeper, fuller, higher level of ministry.

It's actually a positive view of life, optimistic. Some of us are at the age where every doctor visit ends with the explanation "Well, you're getting older," which is just a gentler version of "No, you're not getting better; it's all down hill from here!" So it's nice to be part of something that by nature says, "Oh, you've got so much left in the tank! There's so much more you

can do, so much you can improve. You are on the upside! Wail till you see what tomorrow brings!”

Today, we’re celebrating tomorrow, the year ahead. That special-edition newsletter you received this morning along with your bulletin highlights three special people who symbolize that spirit of going farther, deeper, better in our church life.

Jamilah starts her second year with us as a Yale Divinity School “Fellow.” She came in last year, made an impact, bringing that University of Michigan no-nonsense athletic discipline to our rambunctious middle schoolers. By the end of her first year, she had them eating out of her hand, ending her year with a creative prayer retreat that touched everyone. We’re ready for her “second touch.”

Rachel just finished her summer internship with us. Rachel’s first venture was meant to be simple, easy. She was just going to shadow me and Alida, watch what we do, help out a little bit, see if she liked it, do a little of this, a little of that. Instead, she took us by storm, jumping in with both feet, touching us with her first touch, impressing us with a depth of feeling, a tireless work ethic, and a great heart for ministry. So we wanted more, she wanted more—a second touch, a second mile—and now she’s joined us for the year ahead.

And Niles. He’s been around here forever. He’s grown up in our church, played the cello from time to time. We love it. It was very nice. We could leave it at that. Instead with our “second touch,” we’re taking Niles deeper, further, more intentionally. He’s our first “Artist in Residence,” a young man with enormous gifts and a spirit to match, and we’ll use him—God will use him—in exciting ways in the year ahead.

We are a “second touch/second mile” church. That’s our theme. That’s our plan, and you are just the church to make it happen.

“Second Touch Message”

I’ve always loved the “second touch” story. Some friends bring a blind man to Jesus to heal him. The Bible tells us Jesus spits on the guy’s eyes, and the result is pretty good. The guy says, “I can see people. They look like trees, walking!” That’s pretty cool. The guy goes from being blind, a blank slate before his eyes, a scary and difficult existence. Suddenly, he sees people, shapes, sizes, colors, movement, life, all around him. Yes, it lacks definition, perhaps, people “look like trees, walking,” stick figures. Maybe he couldn’t

distinguish Mary from Susan or Joe from Bill, but he sees life as he never had before. Pretty cool.

Not for Jesus. Not good enough for Jesus. He refused to be satisfied. So he touches the blind guy a second time, a second touch, until, the Bible says, "he saw everything clearly." (Mark 8:22-25)

That's our approach to church. No halfway measures. Why settle for "pretty cool" or "pretty good" when we have the capability and the calling to be really cool, really good?

I'm not the best person up here to be talking about Bruce Springsteen. Alida is the Springsteen nut. He's not Green Day, but he's pretty good. As part of our daughter's college graduation celebration, Alida took Brigitta to a Springsteen concert, and she came back more devoted than ever. "You have to listen to this . . . you have to watch this . . . you should have been there . . . he was the best ever!"

Now, as I said, he's not bad, he's pretty good. He's in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; he's got a great band. They've been around forever. Seems like a good time to lay back, play out the string, let the status be quo, rest on your laurels, you've earned them.

But then, Springsteen wouldn't be Springsteen. He'd be Paul Revere and the Raiders. What grabbed Alida this summer, and me, was an old Springsteen song, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," a musical tribute to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. They dusted it off, started doing it again, gave it a "second touch." They added a guitarist, Tom Morello, of Rage Against the Machine, and they turned him loose. Morello did things on a guitar I'd never imagined; he did more and more, and when you thought there wasn't any more to be had, he did even more. The whole song took on a flavor, a spirit, a message, a power of its own. And remember, the song was pretty cool before. The band was pretty cool before.

But Springsteen had the vision, the gumption, the boldness and the humility to believe, to know, they could do better. And they did.

The problem with my telling you we can do better is that you probably make two assumptions: first, you think I think we're not doing well. Second, you think I think I want us to be big, bigger, biggest. No. Neither one. I think we're pretty good. And what I want is for us to be the best church we can be, *the best we can be*.

That's what the "second touch, the second mile" is all about in the Bible, and right here. In the "second touch" story, the first touch was pretty good, pretty miraculous. It was good enough for most of the folks there that day. But Jesus dared to demand more of himself, and Jesus dared to want more for the people around him. In the "second mile" story, going the first mile fulfills the requirement, meets the expectation of "enough is enough." For some. For most, maybe. Not for Jesus. And, be honest with me . . . not for you either. That's not your makeup. Not at work, not in family, not for yourself. You're not slide-by-with-the-minimum, settle-for-the-middle kind of people, do-enough-to-pass kind of people.

But happily you *are* the right kind of people with the right kind of God ready for the right kind of "second touch" ministry.

And that's more than pretty good.