

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 11, 2015
Sermon Title: "The Upside-down Kingdom" & "Forgiveness"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe & Rachel Baumann
Scripture: Matthew 5:1-10 & Matthew 6:9-13

Matthew 5:1-10

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Several years ago Alida and I began to preach joint sermons. You've seen us do it on Christmas Eve, Easter, when we want to give you two voices or two perspectives. On Christmas Eve, we gave you three voices. As I reflected on the men of that first Christmas, Alida reflected on the women, and Rachel was Mary, looking back from our world today, remembering that first Christmas. Today, Rachel and I are doing a joint sermon.

In baseball, the best prospects are called "five-tool players." They have all the qualities of greatness—they can run, they can catch, throw, and hit. They've got it all. Rachel is a "five-tool player." She has all the qualities of greatness as she considers pastoral ministry of some sort.

Growing up here in Fairfield, captaining the soccer team at Ludlowe High School, graduating last spring from Bates College, Rachel came to us to

explore ministry, to see what it's like, to discern, to feel, to know God's call for her life. Basically, it's been a "baptism by fire"; we've had her do everything; and today, we bring her into the pulpit, preaching her own sermon, her first, based on Jesus's most famous sermon, the "Sermon on the Mount."

In our weekly Bible Study, "The Gathering," we've been working our way through the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus really does turn everything inside out, upside down, leading some to call Jesus's world "the upside-down kingdom." From personal values to prayer, from behavior to attitude, Jesus says, "Come on guys, we can do better."

My part of the sermon started percolating a few weeks ago (if you will forgive a little politics), when the president announced a new relationship with Cuba. His reasoning was "If something isn't working after 50 years, try something different." My journey with Fidel Castro began as a little kid. Back in the '50s in Queens, everybody loved Castro at first; for whatever reason, we were all rooting for him. So, when he turned on his own people, oppressing and killing, the betrayal was personal. We felt it. For decades, we've all wanted new life for the people of Cuba. All the president said was after 50 years of trying to change things one way, and it wasn't working, let's try another way.

That's actually been a recurring theme in some of my sermons; namely, Jesus makes us think in new ways. It's not always comfortable, but when old ways aren't working, try a new way. In my sermon, I'll tackle some of that "new way," and then Rachel will take us to the heart of forgiveness in Jesus's Lord's Prayer.

O.K., Jesus uses his Sermon on the Mount to tell everybody "It's time for a change. As a Christian church, we refer to Jesus as the Son of God; he's part of the Trinity. All that can get confusing, but what it means is that when Jesus is talking, he's talking for God. He represents God's thinking. And by the time Jesus came along, God was thinking, "This world's not working, something's not right, people aren't getting it, we need to make some changes. People can't just keep doing the same thing the same way over and over again and expect improvement." Jesus is the improvement.

You've probably heard of the Beatitudes, Jesus's list of qualities that lead to real happiness. "Blessed are the meek," he says, and adds, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, the persecuted, the peacemakers, they that mourn," and so forth. Nobody liked that list back then. Nobody likes it now. But Jesus's point was this: humanity is thousands of years old, religion is thousands of years old. And what have we got to show for it? People were still arrogant,

conceited, deceitful, control freaks, power grabbers, warmongers, and business cheats.

Even civilization wasn't that civilized, Alexander the Great wasn't great; the so-called "Pax Romana," the Roman Peace, wasn't peaceful. Even religion needed help. It was time for a change, and Jesus dared some BIG changes.

"Love your enemies," he said! "Turn the other cheek." "Go the extra mile." "Stop lusting." "Don't get angry." "Be perfect." Let's start with lust and anger. Actually, what Jesus does is start with adultery and murder. He says everybody knows the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," everybody agrees those are bad, shouldn't do it, but there sure is a lot of it.

So Jesus gets to the cause. Adultery is a symptom. Adultery is a result of something else at the root. Jesus says, get to the root, and the root of most adultery is lust. Lust is when you want something you shouldn't have but you hanker for, you obsess over, you, well, you know the phrase, you "lust" after it. I always tell people "Lust is determined by the amount of drool hanging from the corners of your lips."

You know the story of King David and Bathsheba. The Bible tells us David was in his own house, minding his own business, when he looks out the window and he sees Bathsheba in her own house taking a bath. So far, nobody's done anything wrong. The problem is a half-hour later, when David is still standing at the window with binoculars, staring at Bathsheba taking her bath. That's where lust kicks in, and before you know it, David seduces her, commits adultery, gets her pregnant, and murders her husband.

Jesus simply asks, "What's the key problem here?" It didn't start with murder or adultery or a bath! It started with lust. Likewise, murder is a symptom. Murder is a result of something else at the root, Jesus says, and the root of most murder is anger. Something happens, somebody gets slighted, annoyed; words are exchanged, insults, fisticuffs. Ego, pride, and vanity jump in; somebody draws a knife, a gun. Before you know it, you've got a mountain made out of a molehill, and somebody is dead. Mostly, we focus on the murder. Lately, folks focus on the weapon. Jesus focuses on the anger. "Start there," Jesus says.

By this point in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, he had solved the murder and adultery, told everybody how to be happy, and had everybody asking, "Is this guy serious?" So he went further! Don't drool. Don't get angry. Don't swear. Don't revenge. Don't resist evil. Plus, love your enemies, turn the other cheek. Be perfect.

The trouble with all this conversation about controlling anger, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, is that right away people want to talk about ISIS, 9/11, Newtown. It's what some people call the "Nazification of conversation," that whenever we talk about forgiveness or loving our enemies, someone says, "Well, yeah, but what about Hitler? What about Osama bin Laden? What about those killers and terrorists in Pakistan?" I get that. Let me confess to you: my Christianity isn't good enough for me to figure out how to love those particular enemies, or how to turn the other cheek to Nazis, Islamic terrorists, or school killers.

All of that is on the "macro" level, way up there on the world stage. Most of us live most of our lives on the "micro" stage. You, me, our town, friends, relatives, coworkers, neighbors . . . throw in some classmates, teammates, golfing buddies, book club members. That's where we live our lives, and that's our laboratory for testing Jesus's teaching.

Jesus is trying to give us a path to victory, a strategy for success. He's not some happy-sappy, wimpy, let-everybody-walk-all-over-you kind of guy. He's actually trying to help us be successful in our relationships. We lose so much energy plotting revenge, holding onto a grudge, spewing anger, arguing, fighting. What would happen, Jesus wonders out loud, if we didn't participate in all that drama? Family drama, work drama, school drama, friend drama?

What would happen if we didn't push back, shout louder, get even, go for the jugular? Have to win every issue every time? Every single one of us sitting here right now can think of one person that irritates the heck out of you, that has hurt you, annoyed you, troubled you; one person that ruins your day every time you think about it. "Why," Jesus asks, "why let one of your precious days be ruined?" He's right, and we know it.

Sermon Title: Forgiveness
 Rachel Baumann, Ministry Intern
Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

Matthew 6:9-13

*'Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.*

"Forgiveness." It's a word we hear all the time. But how often do we really think about it? We are about to sing the Lord's prayer together, and we will ask God to forgive us "our debts" as we forgive "our debtors."

I've been thinking about forgiveness a lot. Especially because it's a new year, and, as David mentioned in his sermon right after Christmas, it's time for a new slate. As some of you might know, my mother is Jewish, so I also celebrate and observe some of the Jewish holidays.

In the Jewish tradition, during the days between Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Jews are supposed to not just ask God for forgiveness, but also ask anyone in their life who they think they need to seek forgiveness from.

Perhaps forgiveness is a pretty radical thing. But I've also been thinking about forgiveness ever since Bible Study on the Thursday before Christmas. We were studying the Lord's Prayer and analyzing it, word by word, phrase by phrase. We questioned whether we were praying "in the right way" if we said the Lord's Prayer so routinely.

I mentioned that sometimes prayer is like doing something you're really good at. For me, I got pretty good at soccer. I didn't have to think about where I would pass the ball, how to set up an attack, how to dribble. It becomes second nature.

We have said the Lord's Prayer so often, repeated it so many times that it has become instinctive. Kind of like something that you're good at. For you, knowing something that deeply—maybe like a sport. Maybe it's a skill like cooking, creating art, or singing. Or playing the piano.

And that is a large part of prayer, isn't it? It is so deeply entrenched in us that it becomes muscle memory. When something presents itself to you and you instinctively respond, you have internalized it in a profound way.

That doesn't mean, of course, that we shouldn't stop sometimes and closely examine each word of what we are saying. After all, what does it mean to forgive? Are some acts so terrible that they are impossible to forgive? Some of you in Bible Study thought so.

Others thought that if you use God's love and let it flow into you, all types of forgiveness are possible. And isn't that what happens on the cross? That is the central element of Christianity. God allows his only son to be sacrificed; yet Jesus forgives those who have put him on the cross.

We know the all-too-familiar line from Luke: "Then Jesus said, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) In a sense, Jesus is saying that even the worst crime can be forgiven. Can we accept or understand this? Maybe we shouldn't accept it very quickly.

I guess that question is what religion and morality and literature try to do—they ask us to deeply look at Scripture, ethics, and words and relate them to the "bigger questions."

Like the question of forgiveness. Some of you in Bible Study thought that in order to be forgiven, you have to forgive. The fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer asks God to forgive us "our debts." As you know, I'm young and really don't have a ton of life experience, so I don't want to stand up here and "preach" knowingly about forgiveness (even though that's kind of what I'm doing now). But I can tell you that many of you have given me myriad insights about life, compassion, empathy, kindness, and yes, forgiveness.

Some of us are reading Anne Lamott's new book for our church's monthly book chat. In *Small Victories*, Lamott is as honest as they come. She's messed up—or so she thinks. She discusses her problems with alcoholism, unhealthy relationships, and how both of these led to some pretty poor decisions in her life. These experiences have taught her about forgiveness, which, she argues, "is the hardest work we do." It's important not just to the person you are forgiving, but for you. "Not forgiving," she writes, "is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

Rat poison? A pretty strange image, right? It's one I definitely would prefer not to think about. But I think we have to try to imagine this rat poison, or we will not fully understand the damage that paralyzing regret, shame, or unforgiving thoughts can be, how they can become so entrenched in us and become a part of who we are.

The thing is, I think we all have a little bit of this rat poison in us. Maybe it's been festering—because that's what poison tends to do. Isn't it easier to just

shove hurts, betrayals, vulnerabilities, fights, the past under the rug for later? Who likes confrontation? Not many people I know. But like any poison, if not treated, if not flushed out of our body, it will seep into every part of us.

Marvin Bell, a poet born in 1937 in the Bronx, often writes about life and the “stuff it contains,” the stuff that seeps into our hearts, minds, and bodies. I would like to share a bit of a poem that I am drawn to. You can follow along in your bulletin.

“Too late: Life got its tentacles around you, its hooks into your heart, And suddenly you come awake as if for the first time, and you are standing in a part of the town where the air is sweet—your face flushed, your chest thumping, your stomach a planet, your heart a planet, your every organ a separate planet, all of it of a piece though the pieces turn separately, O silent indications of the inevitable as among the natural restraints of winter and good sense, life blows you apart in her arms.”

I went into New York last Saturday to see a play based on a book I had read. You might know it— *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone is a severely autistic boy, a math genius, who has trouble understanding other people’s emotions. As he repeats throughout the play, “People confuse me. They speak in metaphors.”

Christopher sets out on a mission to discover who killed his neighbor’s dog, which culminates in his unearthing several major betrayals by the person he trusts the most—his father. Distraught, Christopher decides to leave his father, but the thought of travel terrifies him. The play shows us how uncomfortable Christopher is: we see the lights change, we see the stars explode on the ceiling, we hear the thunder of the train . . . Getting on a subway or catching a train, which you or I might take for granted, is pretty much the worst thing Christopher can imagine.

However, the boy remembers everything his father taught him, because the actor who plays his father is literally standing in the audience, giving Christopher directions, and therefore Christopher manages to get to London.

The play reminds us that we can never truly understand someone else’s experience. But we must try. And, of course, Christopher—and the audience—are still heartbroken over these betrayals . . . His father did betray him for a good reason, because he sought to protect him from an unpleasant truth . . . But how to forgive?

Life is like that, isn't it? We have all of this regret, don't we? And we're standing at a crossroads (just like in Marvin Bell's poem, where your face is flushed, your chest is thumping, your stomach is a planet).

So we have our hearts thumping and our minds teetering on the edge of stress and anxiety and maybe anger. The past is with us. We don't quite know how to move on or forward or quite how to forgive or if forgiveness is even an option. So, at that moment, we have to make that difficult decision. Are we going to let life break us down hurt by hurt (as the poem indicates, that life can blow us apart)—or are we going to become awake through it all (for the first time)—even if it's painful?

Let us remember when Peter asks Jesus in the Book of Matthew how "much" one is supposed to forgive another. Jesus tells us that it is more than we think—and therefore, probably a lot harder to go through the process: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "No, no. Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22) Seventy-seven times? That's a lot. But maybe, just maybe, we need it.

This is what so many of us, including Christopher Boone from the play, have to learn how to do. How to forgive ourselves, how to forgive those who have wronged us, how to forgive when our minds, our culture, our instincts are telling us to do the opposite. I think we all have these "tentacles" stuck around our hearts. We don't want to let go of the past—of our grievances, of our anger. But maybe God is challenging us to do so.

Our daily efforts with prayer (and anything else that brings you closer to God and a sense of peace) are helping us to remember each word of the Lord's Prayer and to act on it.

For those who have never read Japanese author Haruki Murakami, go now! Stop listening to me, and pick up one of his many brilliant novels. I read his new one this fall, which is about a man's attempt to revisit his painful past and discover why his friends from high school abandoned him. When you read Murakami, you forget you are reading a novel, and feel as though you are experiencing life itself.

So, let me end with one of my favorite lines from the novel. He writes, "One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone. They are, instead, linked deeply through their wounds. Pain linked to pain, fragility to fragility. There is no silence without a cry of grief, no forgiveness without bloodshed, no acceptance without a passage through acute loss. That is what lies at the root of true harmony." (Murakami, Haruki. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His*

Years of Pilgrimage: A novel. Trans. Philip Gabriel. First Edition ed. New York: Knopf, 2014. Print.)

I'm going to be honest. I don't know if we can ever reach that true harmony. But God knows this. And he knew this on the cross, and Jesus knew this when he taught his disciples to pray and to ask others and God and even ourselves for forgiveness. But I do think the effort toward true harmony—through prayer, through radical forgiveness, through faith, through love—is what we have to cling to.