

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



---

Date: May 3, 2015  
Sermon Title: When Good Things Happen to Good People  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Luke 13:1-9

---

## **Luke 13:1-9**

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'*

*Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."*

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm in a great mood. It's already been a great weekend. I knew his would be a great day, so why the heck did I pick such a depressing, disturbing, sad Scripture? Well, that's life, isn't it? Some people call it "yin and yang." Some days you're up. Some days you're down. Some days you're up and down on the same day.

I watched a 20-year-old football game this week, played in Texas. Football is big in Texas, and this was a big game between two legendary powerhouse teams with everything on the line. By the fourth quarter, it was all over. One team was killing the other, 41-17, with three minutes left! Game over. The winning players even started taking off their equipment! The losing fans left the stadium. Then the losing team started scoring touchdown after touchdown; they kept getting the ball because this one player on the winning

team kept fumbling, so the losing team kept scoring. All of a sudden, the losing team is winning, 44 to 41. Two seconds to go! Crazy! All the folks who were whooping and hollering, now they're crying; everybody who was crying is now whooping and hollering. Two seconds left. The team that is now winning kicks off to . . . guess who . . . the kid who kept fumbling. HE takes the ball and runs 90 yards for the winning touchdown. More craziness. Nobody on either team knows what's what. In the space of three minutes, they all went from the highest highs to the lowest lows; and from the lowest lows to the highest highs. They ALL had sorrow and humiliation and defeat; AND they had joy, pride, and victory, back and forth, up and down, both sides. That's life.

Me? Three weeks ago I was in Venice. Two weeks ago I was in Budapest. Last Sunday I was in Prague. Twenty perfect days, perfect in every way every day. Life's like that.

And yesterday we had the funeral of a young man, 30 years old, a wonderful life, lost to great tragedy. Over 7,000 people dead in Nepal, an almost Shangri-La-like place, devastated beyond belief. Baltimore, devastated beyond belief, one of America's historic, classic cities, torn asunder by America's unhealed wound of race and poverty and injustice. Life's like that, too.

Plus, we just went through that at church, didn't we? Happy Palm Sunday one day, beautiful palms, great music, joy, kids parading. Five days later, Jesus on the cross. Dead. Two days later, Easter, 1,100 people in church, Resurrection, lilies everywhere. Life's like that.

Alida left me in Prague so I could focus for a week trying to finish writing my next book. It's about "Church," about you and me and the best we are at church. The writing process has me filling my head with a thousand memories of church and ministry from childhood right up to now. The moment, the very moment I saw riots in Baltimore, I flashed back to the summer of 1966. I was working for the New York Bible Society, going from neighborhood to neighborhood, organizing the distribution of free Bibles all over the city. For two weeks I was working out of a church in Bushwick, Brooklyn. I took the subway there each morning, on the overhead subway called the "El." I get off at my subway station in Bushwick, go downstairs, and I have about four blocks to get to the church.

The summer of '66 was Baltimore of 2015, Ferguson of 2014; people were seething, the streets were boiling, the police were on war footing, buildings were burning. Each morning I ran those four blocks to the church, dodging

for cover behind a truck, behind a mailbox, chased by danger real and imagined. Life's like that.

It's interesting, symbolically as well as really, it's interesting that I was running TO church, I was there to give away Bibles. That church, not just my work, but that whole church was literally—not just figuratively but literally—that church was also a sanctuary. You know what "sanctuary" means, don't you? To be a "place of sanctuary" is to be a place of peace, of safety, an oasis, away from the turmoil and the danger and the wrong. And from that safe "place of sanctuary," you renew your strength, as the Bible says. In that great Scripture from Isaiah, it says, "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary." (Isaiah 40:31)

That's our job at Greenfield Hill Church. We're not Baltimore, but Baltimore happens all around us, and it's our America. We are not Nepal, but Nepal happens all around us, and it's our world. There is destruction, there is sorrow, there is evil. There are bad things happening to good people all the time, all around us. You don't have to go to Baltimore or Nepal; there is great hurt right here in Fairfield. All the time, somebody is seriously hurting. Life's like that.

Our Scripture for today is a bit of a mystery. Evidently, Jesus is informed about some horrible injustice, an ISIS-type religious murder by the Romans against the Jews that happened in the Temple in Jerusalem during worship. Jesus responds by referring to some other event when a tower in Jerusalem crumbled and fell down on 18 innocent people, killing them all. Maybe an earthquake or a construction accident or just a mindless tragedy. In both stories, bad things happen to good people for no reason. The folks around Jesus wanted to get into some deep philosophical debates about the meaning or karma or predestination or "where's God," whatever. But Jesus's response is to ask what are you a doing with your life right now, in your world, where are you, how are you being "Good News" in the midst of all the ups and downs of life, all the hurts, all the inexplicables?

Yes, Jesus is saying tragedies take place all around us. Some are done by bad people, some are just plain bad luck. But the question for all of us is what now, with the world in which you live?

Well, we live here, among the dogwoods. Yesterday, Alida and I went to one of our Dogwood vendors to buy a birdhouse. Before we made our selection, a young boy from our church showed us the birdhouse he got. The boy, Everett, has a shaved head. He shaved it to raise money for kids with cancer. When the birdhouse vendor heard what he had done, he gave him

the birdhouse, a \$60 birdhouse, for free, as a thank you, as a reward, as a motivation to keep caring. And when we tried to thank the birdhouse man for such generosity, the birdhouse man thanked us for the spirit of this festival, for what we do. Which is embarrassing because we don't do anything! You do it, you and all the volunteers, you and all the Dogwood chairs.

You use this beauty to create a sacred space of hospitality, of grace, of generosity. You make Dogwood a ministry and a mission, not a burden. You make it possible for people to come up here and "renew their strength" and then go home able to "soar like an eagle, to run and not be weary."

On this particular Sunday, this Dogwood Sunday, this Sunday where we honor decades of loving service by our Dogwood Chairs, this Sunday of beauty and peace, on this particular Sunday I dare to suggest that we are part of the healing process for a wounded world. Part of who we are as a church—not the whole story—but part of who we are as a church is to help good things happen to good people.

We see that in the tremendous helping work funded by the Dogwood profits—children and women and the poor across the landscape, blessed by the dollars raised here. But that's at a distance. Easier to see, and no less important, are the people touched right here by this sacred and beautiful place.

I've often told you we have only two things to offer as a church: beauty and the Good News of our faith. They go hand in hand. We are not a fancy church; we're not modern. Our pews are small and uncomfortable; our bathrooms are so small they are just plain funny. We don't have fancy high-tech capability. We don't have parking. We'll never be a mega church with "mega" anything. But we do have beauty.

That's why people come here to Dogwood. In fact, all year long people come up here. They picnic on the greens, they sit on the benches, they walk around, soaking it all in. The beauty, the oasis, the sanctuary. The power of the Dogwood Festival is our beauty. People take a break from hectic, fast-paced, crazy lives. They come up here to stroll, to amble, to "ease on down the road," to be renewed and refreshed.

The folks we are honoring today, they served as our hospitality specialists, our hospitality queens, our hospitality stars. We call them "Dogwood Chairs," but that doesn't tell half the story. Above all, they make it possible for all these people, literally thousands of people, to come up here for peace, for

true sanctuary. They make it possible for God's "Good News" and God's beauty to soothe and calm and inspire.

Can I tell you secret? Leading the Dogwood Festival is tough, it's hard work. There is a lot of drudgery, there are a lot of thankless tasks, pain-in-the-neck details, mountains of red tape, endless debates, petty annoyances, and just plain stuff. That's all the stuff you don't know, you don't see. From November to January to March and April, right up to the day before, the minute before. But you know what? You never feel that up here, anywhere, from anyone. Whoever comes to Dogwood hoping for an oasis of beauty, a sanctuary of peace, never runs into grumpiness or grinsches or sourpusses or bad attitude. Instead, people are met with a smile, with a joy, with a spirit of, well, hospitality that seems to say "Come in, sit a spell be at peace."

The Good News of Jesus's Gospel in the midst of all the bad is that God's love is greater than anything, however awful, however evil, however hurtful. For a weekend, for a day, for an hour, this place heals of hurts of life.

It was four years ago that Nick Kapetan came up here for Dogwood. He walked around, sought me out, asked to speak privately. He told me he was dying—pancreatic cancer—that he had only a short time to live, and he "needed," he said, he "needed to come to Dogwood one more time." I was touched, of course, but I wanted to know more. Why . . . why was it so special to him? "Church," he said, "this church and Dogwood, that's when life was good." Call it nostalgia, call it romanticism, call it a yearning for a simpler time, a simpler way, a simple church with a simple message of God's love and God's beauty greater than life's ills.

What does that tell you, that a dying man "needed" to come up to his church during Dogwood one more time? That something happens here, something special, something beautiful, something good.

To all who make it possible, every day, all year long, thank you!