

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 4, 2015
Sermon Title: The Pope and Us
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-19

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

Perhaps the number-one preaching philosophy at our church is that when something in pop culture or media connects with religion, we grab it and run with it. Whether it's the Russell Crowe movie, "Noah," or "The Da Vinci Code," or politicians' quoting Scripture, if it catches your attention, we use it for a teaching moment.

You may remember a few Sundays ago, Alida and I preached three mini-sermons with these unlikely titles: "Donald Trump is Right," "Joe Biden is Right," and "Ben Carson is Right."

Donald Trump had pumped up the Bible. Joe Biden raised the power of prayer. Ben Carson had advocated for tithing. So we took advantage of the spotlight they brought to three very religious topics.

Today, let's grab hold of the pope's visit and run with it. In a whirlwind week, the pope gave us a million "teachable moments" that hit all the hot

buttons: church, state, separation of church and state, social justice, climate change, the death penalty, war, peace, poverty, prayer, *and* Jesus Christ.

We do our weekly class on "Religion in the News," and the pope has given me enough material to last a year. Just the headlines made fascinating reading, from snarky to profound. I'll start with the good stuff:

"Pope's First Message: Pastoral & Political" (*The New York Times* 9/24)

"Pope For All Species" "Francis's Empathy Lifts Up Humans, Animals, and Christianity" (*The New York Times*: Nicholas Kristof. 9/24)

"Pope Francis, in Congress, Pleads for Unity on World's Woes" (*The New York Times* 9/24)

"A Humble Pope, Challenging the World" (*The New York Times* 9/18)

"Elaborate Welcome Mat for a Simple Pope" (*The New York Times* 9/21)

"Sacred Agent Man" Politicians and Kardashians take back seat (*New York Post* 9/21)

"Pope Highlights A U.S. Fantastic Four": Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton (*The Boston Globe* 9/25)

"OMG: Pope Rocks New York" (*New York Post* 9/23)

"Pope Shines at Meeting of (World) Leaders"

"Pope Recalls the Forgotten: Calls for Social Justice"

"Mass-ive Crowd" (get it?)

And there were zillions of photos: the pope with Fidel Castro, John Boehner, a little immigrant girl, prisoners, the homeless, President Obama. The pope with a soccer ball or riding through Central Park or preaching at Madison Square Garden. And other images: a million worshippers in Philadelphia, a gigantic electronic billboard of Jesus in Revolutionary Square in Havana. Yes, Che Guevara and Jesus!

Of course, it wasn't all peace and love. The *New York Times's* Maureen Dowd wondered, "Is Francis a Perilous Pope?" writing that he is "undeniably cool but masks Church sexism." (9/26) And the *New York Post* hammered him every day. In "The New York He Won't See," Michael Goodwin lamented that he would not see vagrants, potholes, crime, and hamstrung police. (9/23) Linda Chavez took him to task for being too weak on abortion. (9/25) *The Wall Street Journal's* Peggy Noonan, in "The Pope I Love . . . and the One I Love Less," called him a "super-groovy pope," who is too concerned about the excesses of capitalism. (9/25) In "Pope Francis Should Take a Vow of Silence on this," Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* accused the pope of sounding like a Democratic Party Convention speech, calling him "the Rolling Stone Pope." (9/23)

But George Will in the *New York Post* took snarky, insulting invective to new heights with a column titled, "Go-green Papal Bull Will Make Life a Hell" and

manages to describe the pope as “sanctimonious, reactionary, shrill, woolly, hyperbolic, a Peronist populist, flamboyant,” saying that he is “against modernity, rationality, science, creativity,” and when you get right down to it, he’s “un-American.” (9/21)

George Will would have liked my grandfather. My grandfather was a wonderful man, a great man, a pastor for over 70 years. Kind, hard working . . . and very anti-Catholic. The religion he grew up in focused on Biblical prophecy, especially the Old Testament Book of Daniel and the New Testament Book of Revelation. Both books, in highly symbolic ways, describe the various bad guys of history: ancient Babylon, ancient Persia, the Roman Empire, and some say, foretelling the evils of the Soviet Union, the United Nations, and, yes, the Catholic Church. My father shook loose from that thinking and spent his 70 years as a pastor in wonderful harmony with Catholics—priests, nuns, and churches. And now, here we are with a sermon, “The Pope and Us.”

Our Scripture lesson takes us to the major dividing point between Protestants and Catholics. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that am?” What’s the talk around town? What do folks think? The disciples gave a few answers, but Jesus pressed them. “Who do you, *you*, say that I am?” It was Peter, the ever-bold, brash, shoot-from-the-hip Peter, who declared, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Peter was the first person on earth to declare that, to “get” it. Other people thought, “Hey, that Jesus, he’s really something . . . a holy man, a prophet, a miracle worker, a great, great person!”

But Peter says, “No, you are much more. You are the *Christ*, you are what the world has been waiting for, forever.” And here’s where it gets tricky. This is when Jesus gave Peter the name “Peter.” You see, that wasn’t his real name, which was Simon, but Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means “rock,” and Jesus says, “On this *rock* I will build my church,” and then deputizes the church to represent his work on earth. Now, for Catholics, it is crystal clear. Jesus was saying he would build his church on this *rock*, Peter, so Peter is the first pope, and all popes sit on the “Throne” of St. Peter . . . they are all successors to St. Peter because Jesus said so.

For Protestants, it is also crystal clear. Peter is the first to declare his faith in Christ with that profound statement of faith: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus says, “On this rock, this faith, on this belief I will build my church.” So Catholics have a church rooted in the pope all the way back to St. Peter, built on history and tradition. Protestants have a church rooted in personal faith, you and God linked by simple faith, built on faith, just faith. Yes, we have other differences, mostly about style and hierarchy,

debates about the role of Mary, the power of clergy, and the substance of Holy Communion.

For Catholics, Holy Communion is a miracle. The priest literally changes the wafer and wine into the flesh and blood of Jesus. For us, the miracle of Holy Communion is God's amazing love through Jesus Christ, symbolized by the bread and juice. So we have these differences that have waxed and waned through the centuries. We no longer slaughter one another with wars known by their duration, like "the Hundred Years' War," "the Thirty Years' War." We no longer burn one another at the stake. We no longer exclude one another from our own private heavens.

As a result, even we New England Pilgrim/Puritan-bred Protestant Congregationalists can sit back, take in the pope's visit, enjoy the good parts, slough off the disagreements, and see what we have in common. What we have in common, more than ever before, is Scripture: the Bible. Not doctrine, not tradition, not hierarchy, not history. But with Pope Francis we share a common devotion to Scripture, to looking at what Jesus said and did.

The pope kept returning to Jesus's Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That was Jesus's simple guiding ethic. Jesus expressed it in various ways, like "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," and in the Lord's Prayer, saying to God, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive others." The idea is the same: balance, harmony quid pro quo; treat others as you'd like to be treated. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount teaches us to be people we'd like other people to be and to be people others would like to be around. Jesus was trying to create a new person, a new humanity. It's not easy—not for the pope, not for us. The pope leads an ancient humongous worldwide institution. It doesn't change overnight.

You know all those "light bulb" jokes, right? The one about Congregationalists goes like this: "How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is *Change*? My grandmother donated that light bulb!" And Congregationalists are only a few hundred years old. The pope's challenges are tougher than our light bulbs. The Catholic priest child-abuse horrors are still simmering. There is still denial and resistance and great, great pain and a failure to really grasp it.

The pope is also a product of our times. We live not only in a dangerous world but also a dangerously divided world. He looks at a world crying out for attention. He has the world's biggest stage. People are hungry for

guidance, but in this hypercritical age, the pope knows anything he says will infuriate half of America. Pro-life? YAY! Pro-climate change? BOO!

Look what happened when he met with that anti-gay-marriage Kentucky town clerk. People praised him or accused him of using her to promote civil disobedience against gay marriage and Obamacare and to take a stand for religious liberty. Turns out the only real private audience the pope had was with a former student, a gay man with his partner. Now *everyone* is mad at him. But that's life, and that's the life of a pastor. Above all, he seems to be a pastoral pope.

A friend said to me the other day that he chose to be in our church because this church is not a top-down church but a bottom-up church. We exist to serve one another, to love one another. Our Wednesday night speaker on Islam made the same point. He said that our greatest strengths in defeating militant Islamist terrorism are the founding principles of this country: "We, the People." We, in concert; we, in harmony; we, together, in freedom.

In ways large and small, that is the kind of religious faith, spirituality, even Christianity, Pope Francis was trying to present. "We, the people" want a faith, want a nation, want a political life, want a neighborhood, want a church that yearns "to do unto others as we would have them do unto us."

Let's sing our closing hymn, also known as the Greenfield Hill Church Hymn, written by Rev. Timothy Dwight, early pastor of this church.

I Love Your Church, O, God

*I love your church, O God,
On earth your blest abode,
The people our redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.*

*I love your church, O God,
Whose walls before you stand,
Dear as the apple of your eye,
And graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall,
In love my prayers ascend,
To serve your church, my toils be given,
Till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys,
I prize your people's ways,
The sweet communion, solemn vows,
The hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,
To Zion shall be given
The brightest glories earth can yield,
And brighter bliss of heaven.*