

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: November 8, 2015
Sermon Title: Come Over and Help Us
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Acts 16:6-10

Acts 16:6-10

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Our church-wide Bible Study this year is focusing on how Church got started, how Christianity came into being, and it comes straight from the Book of Acts. It's called *Acts* because it is about the *acts*, the actions, of the first generation of Christians. And by the way, we send out an e-mail version of the Bible Study each week, so if you want to follow along, give us your e-mail address. It's also on the church Web site each week. But here's a quick summary of what we've done since Labor Day in the Book of Acts.

After Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, then comes Easter. Either Jesus was raised from the dead, or he wasn't. The Bible tells us he was and spent 40 days "showing himself and offering convincing proof he was alive." (Acts 1:3) Then, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples with such power, such boldness, such effectiveness, that 3,000 people got baptized and joined Jesus's followers in one day! And many more joined every day.

There was such euphoria, such love, that all those folks started hanging out together, full time, living and eating and sharing together. Each day the disciples would meet with those people and patiently teach the "newbies" about Jesus's life and the meaning of that life, recalling stories and parables and miracles and lessons to be learned and applied. And more joined. They

weren't called "Christians" yet, they weren't a church yet, they were just a movement, people who really, really believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, and therefore Jesus must be God's chosen, God's Messiah, the world's Savior.

The popularity of the movement drew attention, then criticism, then opposition; there was contention and division, there were growing pains, turf battles. And then persecution. People were roused, arrested, beaten, interrogated, and then the killing started. Christianity gained its first martyr when St. Stephen stood up for his faith and was stoned to death. And the man in charge of that murder was the fellow we know as "Paul," yes, St. Paul. He began as the chief persecutor, the chief tormentor, the chief executioner of Christians. Until Jesus literally knocked him off his high horse. The risen Jesus confronted Paul, literally mano a mano, and then shocked everybody by calling Paul into Christian ministry.

In one fell swoop, Paul went from Christianity's staunchest enemy to become the number-one architect of what we now call the "Christian Church." He wrote half of the New Testament, he's the main character in the Book of Acts. He established churches all over the Mediterranean. He almost singlehandedly made Christianity a world religion. Year after year Paul took Christianity farther away from its provincial roots, farther away from Jerusalem, Judaism, Israel, the Middle East. That's how we end up with today's little Scripture story. Paul is again on the march, hunting new vistas, new places, new people, new ways to make a difference, to save the world, to help.

He tried to "enter Bithynia," but the Bible says, "The spirit of Jesus would not allow him to." Interesting verse. We cannot help but wonder what happened. An unfriendly border guard? A sudden storm? Sickness? A dream? A warning? Paul saw everything as being in God's hands, so if he couldn't get into Bithynia, he would see that as God's doing. Instead, Paul has a nighttime vision of "a man from Macedonia begging (Paul), 'Come over to Macedonia and help us, come over and help us.'"

Sometimes life's choices are that simple. One path is blocked. One path is wide open. That's how I got to India, you know. For those who are new to our church, I just got back from India, my 30th trip there, but it all began in with a humble Indian pastor from Jersey City. He kept showing up at my house, at my church, at my office, week after week after week, telling me, beseeching me, "Come over and help us." His name was David Purushothaman. He was the grandson of a Hindu priest who converted to Christianity. The old priest had become convinced that yes, Jesus was alive and was indeed the Savior of the world. But when he converted, the villagers

tried to kill the whole family, but some were able to escape to what we old-timers remember as Madras, now renamed Chennai. My friend grew up there, became a Presbyterian pastor with a great ministry among the poor. Eventually he and his wife and kids moved to New Jersey. Now he was begging me, demanding, really, that I go with him to help.

I did, in 1983. We went to some of the poorest places I had ever seen—remote villages, overwhelmed cities, drought-ravaged, sickness-ravaged, poverty ravaged people. I went running one day when I was over there, through the urban chaos: trucks, buses, masses of humanity, water buffalo, goats, rickshaws. I noticed after a while that a young, tough-looking Indian was running after me, so I ran faster, but he kept after me, closing in, until I finally crashed through the front gate of the church where I was staying. He crashed in after me. Turns out he was my bodyguard. The bishop had sent him to follow the "crazy American" who wanted to run in the hot 110° Indian summer heat. He was there to protect me while I was there at God's invitation. "Come over and help us."

All these years later, this mission work you know as FOCI is still answering the call, "Come over and help us." That's how we end up today in India, with schools, churches, hospitals and clinics, leprosy village, and women's empowerment programs, thanks to you, answering the call to help.

This isn't a fundraising sermon about FOCI, but it is a sermon about helping. How did Will Simon get here today to ask your help with the Connecticut Food Bank? Because Will had the gumption to say to Alida and me, "May I come to church and ask people to help us?"

Actually I think this is Will's way of trying to avoid embarrassment! Every year students from his school stand on the street corners in New Haven asking for money for the Connecticut Food Bank, and every year Alida and I give them money, but not before asking if they know Will and Caroline and Jono and Samantha and Cole, and we brag on them, and we make them promise to give a message to them, and I'm sure it's all wonderfully embarrassing, which is entirely our plan in the first place.

Actually, that's how much happens here at Greenfield Hill Church. Somebody asks us to help. Sometimes we worry about overwhelming you, but it's hard to shake that vision of the person calling out to us, "Come over and help us." We've got Will here today. Last week we had our lacrosse boys selling bracelets to help wounded soldiers. We're trying to find 20 of you to shop and bring in Thanksgiving dinner stuff for 20 poor families. We need your church pledge to help keep us going full speed.

Our soldiers in Afghanistan tell us the cupboard is bare, the care packages have dried up. They seem to be forgotten. So this week I got this e-mail:

Dear Rev. Rowe: I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for supporting our men and women out here in this location with the great care packages we've received. There have been many people here whose days have been made much better and greatly blessed due to your support. Thank you so much for what you have provided. Please feel free to send more care packages as you see fit. We have hit a bit of a dry spell out here, and there are many who would be greatly blessed to receive some items.

Thank you again for your support. And we wish you the best. God bless and please take care.

I can put them off, wait until January, but could you, now that I've told you? Isn't that image seared into your mind of a young soldier in his Marine uniform, dusty, battle weary, homesick, yet ever so dignified, standing there as if in a vision, saying, "Come over and help us"? And so we do our best.

Let me say a word about giving. Truth is, giving, generosity, philanthropy, charity, it's all like a gigantic smorgasbord. It's all laid out for you. Some looks good to you, some doesn't; so you try this, you skip that.

There are people who won't pledge, no matter what. There could be a "For Sale" sign on the front lawn, they won't pledge. But they'll give generously to some need, some cause we bring that touches their heart. There are folks who don't give a thought to Afghanistan, but they'll help the hungry in Connecticut. And folks who will do anything and everything for our soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. And there are folks whose very idea of Thanksgiving is making sure a poor family gets a turkey and all the fixings.

As it it was for St. Paul, some paths are closed, some paths are wide open; sometimes you get invited in, sometimes you don't; something grabs you, something doesn't, but we keep the smorgasbord always ready, knowing that there is something there that's just right for you.

We have only a couple more minutes, so let me tell a story or two. Last week in India I met with a dear, dear friend, Mary, 90-plus years old. She was married as a child, widowed as a teenager. Her life was over. At that point she was consigned to a world of abandonment and exclusion. Then she discovered Christ, and literally, literally she was liberated, set free. And Mary went on to live the rest of her life helping the poor. She's been in charge of our little home for the aged—19 elderly ladies, living out their final days in dignity and joy. I met with Mary, it was very moving. She's blind now,

mostly deaf, she can just barely sit up. But she took my hand in hers and she didn't ask, she *demand*ed that I promise, when she dies, we won't abandon her work. She made me promise that we would always have that Home for the Aged. I promised.

Later that day, I met with a village man, whose wife runs our feeding program for the poorest of the poor in their village. They feed 15 people two meals a day. He begged me, with tears in his eyes, to expand the program to feed 25. I promised.

I met with one of our best leaders. Among his mission projects is an effort to help young girls to stay in school, do well, reach their potential. He does this in two ways: we provide clean toilets and good teachers. Absent teachers and filthy toilets are the two top reasons for girls giving up on school. So in this one public school, we built a clean, tiled, staffed toilet, and we provide good, dedicated teachers to tutor the girls after school. In two years, the program is so successful that other schools want our simple help: clean toilets and real teachers. They're saying to us, "Come over and help us." I promised.

It's hard to say *no* when you open your eyes and you see that man from Macedonia, and you see dear elderly Mary, that marine in Afghanistan, that hungry family in Fairfield, that wounded soldier, that construction worker in India, standing there looking right at us, beckoning, saying, "Come over and help us."

Here's my last story I promise. Some years ago, a woman from here in Fairfield called. Not a member, not a neighbor. Just someone from town. Her beloved father had died, and she was dealing with his clothes. "Would you take them?" she asked. He was a successful businessman, and she brought over—no exaggeration—50 suits and sport coats, 100 or so shirts, 10 overcoats, countless sweaters and ties and slacks, all straight from the dry cleaner, still their bags, some brand-new. When she thanked me (yes, she thanked me, us, you, our church!), when she thanked us, I asked her why she called our church. She said she asked a friend what to do, and the friend said, "Call Greenfield Hill Church. They're always helping people."

That's a nice way to be known. May God bless you for it.