

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 28, 2016
Sermon Title: I Kissed the Feet of Jesus
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 17:1-8

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

The Wall Street Journal, in a recent book review, noted, "Churchgoers seem to live longer," probably the result of less stress, they added, especially if the Church teaches "a God who is mild and forgiving." *A God who is mild and forgiving*. (Ross, John J. "Churchgoers Seem To Live Longer." *Wall Street Journal* 16 Feb. 2016: A13. Print.)

Monday night I listened in on a conference at Yale's Battell Chapel on what it takes to live a truly good and meaningful and worthwhile life from an almost Christian perspective. We know it's popular to mock liberal arts and liberal colleges; all the candidates and pundits love to attack the Ivy League, especially Yale. And yet, on a Monday night, over 1,000 students packed the Yale Chapel to hear David Brooks and Miroslav Volf, two outstanding religious thinkers, two people, evangelical in their faith, steeped in faith, proud believers, advocate for the centrality of traditional faith, as we all figure out how to navigate our 21st-century world.

The Wall Street Journal says we're the key to long life; the Yale intellectual superstars say we're the key to a good life. Sounds as though Church is doing something right.

About two years ago, I had the chance to talk with David Brooks in a café in New Haven. I told him how much I appreciated his writing and how often we used his columns in our "Religion in the News" class, and I thanked him. Brooks surprised me. He said, "Thank you for what you do as a Church pastor. That's a lot more important." From his lofty perch at *The New York Times*, on Public Television, and at Yale, he believed that the work of the local Church, us, is important.

Church isn't just some 2,000-year-old anachronism. And yet, we are a 2,000-year-old institution with all that can mean. It can mean we're rigid, it can mean we're precious; it can mean we're outdated or necessary; ossified or vital; yesterday's news, or very much alive now. But one thing's for sure, the world is changing around us fast, and a Church like ours needs to be on our toes.

I know you've been following the presidential primaries, and just three weeks ago all the focus was on Iowa. For months we were told how important the evangelical vote is in Iowa; serious Christians were the biggest voting block, everybody in Iowa goes to Church and votes their faith. God and Church rule Iowa.

And yet, in the last 20 years, 500 Churches have died in Iowa, shut their doors, gone out of business. And that's in the hotbed of Christianity. Churches had better wake up.

For all you baseball fans, spring training has just begun, and all those outstanding athletes are being watched carefully. They may have done great last year or a few years ago or back in the day; maybe they have shown great promise; or they may be coming back from injury or failure or disappointment. And so the sports pages are full of stories with the same theme: will this player be able to recover, will that player be able to throw hard again, or this other player be able to move quickly, or that other player regain his power? Or, is so-and-so washed up, over the hill? Same for Church. Are we ready to play today, or are our best days behind us?

This is my fourth sermon in connection with my new book, and mostly I've avoided telling stories from the book. Instead, I've used the sermons to expand the book, to strengthen my argument that Church done right is a power for good in our world that urgently needs us. But I'm going to tell you a story now, straight from the book, that I've never told you before. It is the most important spiritual experience of my life, and yet in my 18 years here,

I've never told it. I was always looking for some special time. Maybe today is it.

In my years of Habitat for Humanity leadership, I traveled to amazing places in the world, and one trip took me to Guatemala City. I was a big runner in those days. Running is a great way to get to know a new city, so my first day there, a Sunday, I got up early, ran around the city, saw the great Cathedral at the heart of the city, and later went back to the Cathedral to worship. It was everything a Latin-American Cathedral should be—huge, packed, ornate, gold and silver everywhere, quite impressive. But in all honesty, I found it a bit off-putting. I wasn't getting into a worshipful mood.

However, something caught my eye over on the side. A group of Guatemalans were lined up before a life-sized crucifix. The cross was maybe 8 feet tall, and the bloodied, battered body of Jesus was about my size, hanging from the cross, very realistic, very graphic. I watched for a while. People would go up to the cross, one by one, climbing up on a little pedestal, murmur an almost silent prayer, cross themselves . . . and then each one, man, woman, child, each one would lean forward, put out their arm, grab hold of Jesus's leg, and just gently pat it, even stroke it, up and down, ever so softly, tears in their eyes, and then they'd lean forward and kiss Jesus with such reverence, with such emotion, with such love. As if, in some small way, they could take some of Jesus's pain away.

Well, I decided to do it. Me. I got in line, and then got out of line. Twice. Truth is, I was embarrassed. The whole thing was very un-Protestant, un-Baptist (which I was at the time), un-Swedish, un-anything in my experience. In my background, we don't do graphic. We don't do emotion. We don't do bloody Jesus. We don't do crucifixes or statues. But, whatever, I got back in line. First, I looked around to make sure nobody I knew would see me (as if I knew anyone in Guatemala City). Pretty soon it was my turn. The guy behind me nudged me forward. I climbed on the pedestal and looked at Jesus, carefully, intently. I looked at the wounds (you couldn't miss them), the blood dripping from his forehead where the crown of thorns pressed into his flesh, the nails through his hands, the spear wound in his side, the nails through his feet, each wound so visual, so real, so close. I said a little prayer . . . and then, I reached out my arm and began to gently run my hand up and down his leg, as if I could take some of the pain away. Then, I leaned forward and kissed Jesus's feet. It was the single most profound spiritual experience of my life.

It says to me that there's more to our spiritual life, more to our faith, more to our Church than we realize. I heard once that the average human used only 10 percent of our brainpower. I think that's true of our religious power

too. I don't think any of us, any Christian, any Church, uses more than 10 percent of what's possible. And I'm not just talking about us!

I love our Church. This Church is the best, the most fulfilling I've ever had in my whole life, so I'm not picking on us. I'm saying everybody, every Church, Joel Osteen's, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Notre Dame in Paris, Riverside Church—all the biggest and the best, the quaintest and the prettiest—all of us, we operate at about 10 percent spiritually. That means on any given day, in any given Church, there's 90 percent more out there when we're ready. In Guatemala City, I got some of that extra 90 percent.

In our Scripture today, Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain where they got some of that extra 90 percent. The Bible tells us Jesus was "transfigured . . . His face shone like the sun . . . his clothes became white as light . . . Moses and Elijah were standing there with Jesus . . . And the voice of God spoke to them clearly from out of a cloud."

That's the whole shootin' match, isn't it? That's like 100 percent on the spiritual scale. You've got God, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah standing right there, plus supernatural pyrotechnics, spiritual razzmatazz. And Peter says . . . let's build three little chapels, three religious monuments; let's concretize this, institutionalize it, organize it; it'll become a popular pilgrimage spot, tourists will come, we'll set up a ticket booth, charge admission, sell souvenirs. It'll help everybody remember! And that's fine. I mean that. We want things kept, treasured, remembered.

After Easter, Alida and I are going to Florence. Why? Because it's Florence. Because the streets aren't made of asphalt, and the houses aren't prefab, and the churches don't have aluminum siding. Because a long time ago, somebody said, "Let's build something here and preserve it to remember. And we'll charge admission and sell souvenirs, and it will help everybody remember Dante and Michelangelo and Chianti."

That's why all of us, we preserve our cultures, our traditions, our way of doing things just so. We see things narrowly, each of us, everybody through our own prism. We want things familiar, comfortable, routine, no surprises. Until you kiss the feet of Jesus, and your soul explodes.

A couple of years ago, our daughter was doing her semester abroad in the Balkans, so we went to visit her in Belgrade, Serbia. It was my first real immersion into Orthodox Christianity. Most of us are a little bit familiar with Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox; we think of icons and incense and black-robed clergy with big beards. Well, in Belgrade it's Serbian Orthodox, same thing, and each morning I worshipped at a Serbian Orthodox Church.

How to describe it? Let's just say it's 100 percent opposite of Greenfield Hill New England Congregationalism. Totally opposite. It's dark, cavernous, mysterious; for half the worship the priests are hidden behind a screen. You can't see anything but their feet; there are no seats, everybody's standing, people walk up to the front to kiss various icons, big paintings of saints and Mary and Jesus, then the priests come out and chant. I don't understand a word. I have no idea what's going on. And I loved it. Absolutely loved it.

At the back of the Church, what we call the Narthex, there's a gigantic box, actually two layers of boxes, maybe 4 feet wide and 2 feet deep, filled with sand. For a quarter or 50 cents, you buy a candle, short or tall, light it, stick it in the sand, and say a prayer for the dead, for the sick, for somebody. I lit a bunch every morning. I loved it.

Next to the holy sandbox was a big Plexiglas etched face of Jesus. You can guess by now, yes, people line up, cross themselves, kiss Jesus on the lips, then go off to work. Yes, I kissed Jesus on the lips.

So, that's your pastor when I'm not around. I'm putting my lips on a Plexiglas etching of Jesus, I'm lighting candles for the dead, I'm kissing the feet of Jesus. And I'm loving it. None of this is my tradition, my roots, my makeup. I'm Swedish, for Pete's sake. We think almond is a spice. We brought Ikea to the world to add a little flair. Ingrid Bergman is our Beyoncé. And yet, and yet, God gently opened me up to the other 90 percent of my spirit.

You know what's funny? People who've spent 50 years kissing icons and lighting candles, they love coming here and seeing nothing: no statues, no crucifix, no stained glass. Nothing. And they find that thrilling; for them, we are the other 90 percent, and they love it.

So what's my point with this sermon? What's my point with this book? To put it simply, I love Church. I love the idea of it. I love the place of it. I love the people of it. I love our history and our struggles and our heroes and our ideas. I love my lifetime with it. I love getting up every day and doing it. And if, 50 years from now, there's no Greenfield Hill Church, will Fairfield be the better for it, or the worse, or no different? What if, in America, 50 percent of the churches go down the tubes? Any great loss? Or no loss at all? My point is very simple. As long as this Church touches the hearts of people and those hearts touch the heart of God, we'll be here, alive and kicking.

Let me close by taking you back to my Catholic priest friend from Prague, Tomáš Halík. I told you a lot about him last Sunday and in my book. He's a Catholic priest, ordained secretly during the communist persecution, a friend

of Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa, Vaclav Havel . . . and me! A brilliant writer, a terrific pastor, breathing new life into a dormant Church. When we met together, our conversations spanned the globe, but one thing energized him above all else: when he began talking about "the wounds." The wounds of Jesus. The wounds of the world. The wounds suffered by men and woman and children in my neighborhood and his, in my Church and his, in every town and village and city everywhere. The wounds that make us suffer inside or out, physical or mental, public or private, visible or invisible, known or unknown. The wounds in us that mirror the wounds in Jesus.

Tomáš Halík told me a story, a legend about St Mark. St. Mark was one of the youngest followers of Jesus, and when he grew up, he wrote the Gospel of Mark. He was very important to the spread of Christianity, so the Devil wanted to stop St. Mark, weaken him, undermine him in some way, plant doubts. To do that, the Devil disguised himself as Jesus, pretended to be Jesus, so he could steer St. Mark off his path. And the Devil did a good job mimicking Jesus. He got the sandals right, the robe, the look, the overall appearance of Jesus correct. Pretty convincing. Almost. But the Devil forgot one thing: the wounds. St. Mark was astute enough to thoroughly question this apparition, and the final test, the final proof was this: "Show me your wounds," St. Mark said, "show me your wounds." The Devil had forgotten the most important part: the wounds. There were no wounds in his hands, his feet, his side. Mark knew he was a fake. No wounds, no Jesus.

Just this week I read a heart-wrenching article. The author had been visiting and studying Churches all across America that preach "the health and wealth Gospel," the idea that good health and abundant wealth are proof of God's blessing, while sickness and poverty prove your lack of faith, your absence of God. Then this woman got stage 4 cancer. She was immersed in Churches where the wounds of life are proof of God's absence. But for Tomáš Halík and me, the wounds of life are the proof of God's presence.

May I quote myself? Somewhere in the book, I write, "Where Church is done right, God is incredibly real. Church is incredibly alive. And when that happens on a bad day, you know you are in the right place." Last Sunday night, a lot of people were here in this right place. With barely a day's notice, people gathered here in this sanctuary to remember the Andrews family and our whole town in this time of heartache. It couldn't have been simpler. A few words. A few Scriptures. A few prayers. And then we formed a circle all around the sanctuary. Up here in the front, down the side walls, across the back, friends and neighbors and strangers, parents and kids and teenagers, and we lit candles, as we do on Christmas Eve, from one person to the next.

It was beautiful. It was helpful. It was simple. It was faithful. It was, well, Churchy. At its best. Done right. As it should be.

And now, let's stand and sing a beautiful hymn, "Open My Eyes That I May See," No. 586."

*Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!*

*Open my ears, that I may hear
voices of truth thou sendest clear;
and while the wavenotes fall on my ear,
everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!*

*Open my mouth, and let me bear
gladly the warm truth everywhere;
open my heart and let me prepare
love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!*