

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: August 20, 2017
Sermon Title: Home Is Where the _____ Is
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Various

John 14:2-3

In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Luke 9:58

And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

Matthew 6:19-21

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

Luke 17:20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

Where to begin? Last week I harangued you for 20 minutes, and Wendy's closing solo left us all in tears. So, do I keep my foot on the pedal? Or back off, do a nice little airy puff-piece summer sermon?

Have you seen Alida's new car? I was a little worried. You gave me that wonderful 20th anniversary celebration and a generous gift. I go away for a couple of weeks. I come back, and she's driving an Audi GT sports car! Turns

out it's 10 years old, and her brother gave it to her, but it's made for putting your foot on the pedal and not backing off. Who knew you could burn rubber on Bronson Road? Well, maybe the times in which we live call for us to burn rubber every Sunday, to keep our foot on the pedal and go right at the events of the day. Of course, our challenge is to do it in a way that keeps you engaged. Even a loud note gets monotonous if you play the same note the same way all the time.

I read this week that one of the top songs being downloaded is nine minutes, 58 seconds of total silence. It's called "A A A A A Very Good Song." Maybe it's a joke, or a glitch, or commentary on modern-day life, or a breath of fresh air. Well, I'm not giving you 10 minutes of silence. But I'm not haranguing you for 10 minutes either. I'll keep my foot to the pedal but try to make the ride interesting.

Last weekend: Charlottesville, Virginia. Sleepy little Southern college town, University of Virginia, sleepy except when UVA plays in Duke in something. Two of our Church kids left this week to begin their freshman year at UVA. Alida grew up there. Some of our adult members studied there. Pretty place. Alida's family lives there still.

And then all hell breaks loose. With the arrival of hate groups supposedly to protest the taking down of a statue of Robert E. Lee. But when they gathered for their Friday night torchlight parade, they started shouting about Jews. What that has to do with General Lee and the Confederacy and slavery is beyond me. They can't even keep their hatreds straight. Then, we're deluged for a week with attempts to excuse, rationalize, explain, affirm some of the goals, some of the people. Meanwhile, the North Korean guy seems to go on vacation, no longer threatening Guam; but on Thursday, the terrorists seem to be back from their vacation. Slaughtering the innocent in Barcelona, and on Friday, in Finland.

In the battle over statues, some people can't distinguish between the Confederacy's Stonewall Jackson and Valley Forge's George Washington. If ever a week was designed to make your head spin, the last week should do it.

Now let me confess: I believe in evil spirits, gremlins, demons. Generally, I believe they inhabit my car, my computer, technology in general, anything to ruin my day. More and more I think they inhabit newsrooms. When we go to bed at night, gremlins and demons come out of the woodwork and wreak havoc, so that when we wake up the next morning, there will always be eight or nine things to wreck our mood.

So maybe the question of the day is, is there anything to help our mood, to un-ruin the day, give us a boost? The Bible asks it this way: "Is there a balm in Gilead? (Jeremiah 8:22) And, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17) The answer to the first question is yes, there is a balm, a salve, a healing ointment, something to reduce our pain. Our faith, our religion, our Church life, our Scriptures, all are meant to help us feel better. "There *is* a balm in Gilead." The answer to the second question is "Yes, there *is* a word from the Lord. He's not happy."

God is like that: we can always do better. Most of us have had a coach like that, a teacher or two, a parent. Always pushing you, raising the bar. My granddaughter got her SAT scores back, both over 750; one was 780. I told her if my mother were still alive, she'd hug her tight. But my father would want to know which one she got wrong and how she intends to do better. My message today is to give you a "word from the Lord" and help you feel the "balm of Gilead."

This was Vacation Bible School week at our Church, and there is nothing like it for pure joy: 120 kids, our Memorial Room jam-packed, 36 high-schoolers and middle-schoolers as full-fledged staff. Seven college freshmen, kids off to college this very weekend, spending their last free week with us teaching Vacation Bible School. A dozen adults in the middle of August devoted each day to helping the Bible come alive. And, boy, did the Bible come alive! This year's theme was "Heroes of the Bible," each day featuring a Bible story designed to raise a generation of kids without fear, superheroes in their own hearts, superheroes in their own faith, in our own world.

At the start of each day, Alida interacted with a superhero puppet, and then our young staff acted out the Bible story of the day, all to impart a daily quality, an ideal, a virtue to be embraced. I wish you all could have been here Friday at noon for the closing worship, as 156 young people shouted out each one: Hope! Courage! Wisdom! Heart! Power! They believed it. They meant it. They got it!

And then Alida asked them what were the slogans for the week? What were the Bible verses they were given to live by? What is their new motto for life? I'm telling you, the roof of this old Church shook as they shouted Psalm 34: "Do good! Seek peace! Go for it!"

You know what I wish? I wish these alt-right Nazis and KKK-ers had been gathered outside our Church with their feeble hatreds and all their silly enablers. I wish they had been here to see the real future of America and see their own future falling away, crumbling.

Two of the kids at Vacation Bible School were delightfully named Bethlehem and Ephrata, two young girls whom our Church helped settle as refugees from Eritrea, being cared for so lovingly by the Widmer family. The older girl, Bethlehem (yes, that Bethlehem), is 12 years old. She spent her first six years in Eritrea, a country long scarred by war and poverty beyond our imagination. She spent her next six years in a refugee camp. You've seen them on TV. We are not talking about sleep-away camp, we're not talking about army barracks, we're not talking about college dorms. Six years in Eritrea, six years in a refugee camp. And this summer at VBS on Greenfield Hill. Thursday, Bethlehem gave me a hug, and she whispered, "This is the best week of my whole life."

In a world of ISIS and Nazis, of Barcelonas and Charlottesville breaking our hearts, of public action and public statements by public officials leaving us, what? Speechless? Scratching our heads? Fill in the blank yourself. In such a world maybe Vacation Bible School really is "the best week of my whole life."

One mother was so happy with her son's experience as a junior staff person for VBS that she wrote us a thank-you note and included a little gift, a tiny, handcrafted ceramic coin called a "kindness coin." "Thank you for sharing your 'kindness,'" the note said, "Pass it on!"

You might wonder why it's such a big deal. We could just call it a success, pat Marcia on the back and move on, but I want you to see what I saw: 170 total people! That's a lot of families making it a priority, that's a lot of people making it happen, that's a lot of budget provided by you. That's a lot of teaching that stands in direct contrast, *direct contrast*, to the hatred of the world. In our own little way, we were lining up on the right side of the barricades, on the right side of the right side

And as their side shouts, as they did in Charlottesville, "Jews will not replace us! Jews will not replace us! Blood and soil! Blood and soil! The N-word this, the N-word that," over on our side, a generation of children are shouting, "Do good! Seek peace! Hope! Courage! Heart! Go for it!"

I haven't ended up taking this sermon where I intended. In my head, I started with those verses of Scripture we read earlier. They come from Art McCain's outdoor service last Sunday. Art led an inspiring worship on the theme of "Home." In those verses Jesus tells us bluntly, "I can't guarantee anything in this world . . . but I can promise you an eternity worth every effort, every sacrifice. So concentrate on what's important. And mostly," Jesus says, "the key to it all is right inside of you. The kingdom of God is among you."

That's really what young Bethlehem was saying to me. She's seen the Kingdom of Hell in her young life, but she's found the Kingdom of Heaven among you,

among us. In Barcelona, in Charlottesville, what were they but glimpses of Hell on earth and glimpses of Heaven among you, among us.

They held a memorial service this week for Heather Heyer, the young woman murdered by the terrorists in Charlottesville. With a strength beyond explanation, Heather's mom spoke eloquently, passionately, lovingly. She said, "They tried to kill my child to shut her up. Well, guess what? You just magnified her."

I love that. In the midst of her tragedy, she sees her daughter's love for people magnified. Think back to the Christmas story, young Mary is pregnant with a miracle, and she declares, "My soul magnifies the Lord. I rejoice in God my Savior."

That's sort of the world we live in. On one side of the barricade are the God-haters, those who hate everything God stands for. The Nazis. The KKK. ISIS. All God-haters. On the other side, this side, those whose lives "magnify the Lord." I guess that's what were all doing is choosing which side of the barricade we're standing on.

Amazingly, befuddlingly, there are those who tell us that people on both sides are the same, equivalent, noble, righteous. SAD.

We went to see "Hamilton" last week: the story of America's founding through the life of Alexander Hamilton, told in raucous fashion set to hip-hop, rap, and pop music. You get to see America birthed in an explosion of joy, exuberance, optimism. You almost get the sense it could be *fun* being America. They were an imperfect bunch, those founders bounding across the stage of history. They were not yet what they were laying the groundwork for us to become. But they put us on the path.

Sadly, there are those who would take us backward to the "good old days" of Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, who don't see much difference between Heather Heyer and those who marched with torches the night before.

You know what Jesus says, don't you? Jesus says, "You must be born again." People have twisted that a million ways, but I like to look at it at face value: "born again," to become childlike, to face the world with the exuberance, the delight, the innocence, the trust of a child. To go to the barricades with love in your heart, knowing that you will magnify the Lord.

For me, that's the promise of Madelyn's baptism this morning, that's the joy I saw all week long in the innate hope of every child at Vacation Bible School, chanting and believing: "Do good! Seek peace! Go for it!"

Our final hymn I doubt we've ever sung before. I've never heard it, but it fits perfectly with my message. It's all about things that aren't yet fully accomplished, but getting there is half the fun! Let's make it fun to be America again, on the right side of the barricade, doing good, seeking peace, going for it! No. 535, "Faith, Where Trees Are Still in Blossom."

*Faith, while trees are still in blossom,
plans the picking of the fruit;
faith can feel the thrill of harvest
when the buds begin to sprout.*

*Long before the dawn is breaking,
faith anticipates the sun.
Faith is eager for the daylight,
for the work that must be done.*

*Faith, uplifted, tamed the water
of the undivided sea.
and the people of the Hebrews
found the path that made them free.*

*Faith believes that God is faithful:
God will be what God will be.
Faith accepts the call, responding,
"I am willing, God, Send me."*