

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: July 8, 2018
Sermon Title: "How's Your Faith?"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

I used to be a runner, which I loved. Now I'm a walker, which I hate. So what I do when I'm walking is read. I walk the cinder track at Fairfield University reading a book. Yes, it looks silly. Yes, I trip. Yes, I bump into people . . . and turkeys.

This week I'm reading a book by David Gregory, the former host of "Meet the Press," who was unceremoniously fired. David Gregory was, at the time, in the middle of a midlife crisis. But instead of buying a sports car, he had embarked on a spiritual journey, a journey designed to know God. Being sort of half-Jewish, his spiritual journey involved joining a Bible Study, being more intentional about going to synagogue, and seeking out some spiritual teachers.

A key trigger in this whole process was President George Bush the younger, George W. Bush. By his own reckoning, Gregory cut his teeth as a pretty aggressive White House correspondent, so he was with President Bush a lot. On three occasions, when they were somewhat alone, the president would say to Gregory, "How's your faith?" Which is the title of the book I've been reading while walking in circles, bumping into things: *How's Your Faith?*

Gregory didn't take offense at the question; in fact, it pushed him to up his spiritual journey, to get it going more earnestly. Which proved to be a blessing when he got fired by NBC and entered a career wilderness for a few years.

How you answer that question affects how you handle a lot of life's issues. I actually like the question. It's not judgmental or condemnatory or pejorative.

For a lot of years, some Christians would ask people, "Are you saved?" Or, "If you were to die today, do you know where you would spend eternity?" We've all had religious groups ring the doorbell, stop us on the street, using various techniques to intrigue us, intimidate us. One couple gave me a one-two punch. The first guy says, "Isn't the world just awful?" And the second guy says, "Your life must be miserable right now." Another couple offered me a free book if I'd read it. I said, "O.K., if you read *my* book. They made a phone call to headquarters, then told me they weren't allowed to read my book. I have finally arrived as an author—my books are banned by a whole religion! Still, all that was better than the two guys who put a curse on our Church.

You can see why I like President Bush's gentle question, "How's your faith?" That got me thinking about how Jesus engaged people. Whether we like the tactic or not, asking, "Are you saved?" is designed to get you to end up with them, to get you on their team. "How's your faith?" Is less provocative, less "in your face." But it's clearly meant to start a discussion. Most people, when they ask, "How are you?" or "What's up?" don't even wait for an answer. But "How's your faith?" Well, that opens a door.

The Bible tells several stories about Jesus inviting followers. The most famous story is when he goes to the Sea of Galilee, finds two sets of brothers, all fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John. And Jesus makes an immediate connection: "Come," he says, "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Nothing threatening. No arrogance. No putting them down. Just a cute play on words. "Hey, fishermen, let's go after bigger fish. I'll make you fishers of men." Jesus playing right into their personal lives, their life experience, their work.

But perhaps the most telling are two similar stories. Early in his career, Jesus comes across "a man named Matthew, a tax collector," a civil servant, a government employee. (Matthew 9:9-13) Unfortunately, the government Matthew worked for was the enemy, the Roman government, the conquering, occupying army. Matthew made a nice living squeezing dry his fellow Jews to fund the enemy. Matthew wasn't on anybody's good-guy list.

At the end of his career, Jesus comes across "a man named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector and very wealthy." (Luke 19: 1-10) Zacchaeus is an interesting fellow. He was intrigued enough by Jesus to hide up in a tree along the road

Jesus walked through town. He wanted to check Jesus out without being noticed. He didn't want to be challenged, confronted, critiqued. So it was a key moment when Jesus saw Zacchaeus in the tree, called out to him by name. And here's where it's interesting. Jesus does the same thing with Zacchaeus that he did with Matthew. He went to their houses for dinner. He hung out with them.

In those days with Middle Eastern hospitality, dinner guests were a very public thing, friends and family join the dinner, neighbors hovered around the house. People wanted to know what was going on, what's the gossip, who the guests were. And given how unpopular Matthew and Zacchaeus were, the dinners brought out the critics.

The Bible says, "People began to mutter about Jesus," saying, in effect, "Look who he's hanging out with—sinners, cheats, traitors. This is our Messiah? This is the kind of person we're supposed to follow?" We can imagine the derision, the mockery, the snide, snickering comments. But all Jesus was doing was his own version of the George W. Bush question: "How's your faith?" He went to Matthew and said, "Follow me" and ended up following Matthew straight to his house. He looked up at Zacchaeus hiding in plain sight, up in a tree, and said, "Come down from there." And they went straight to his house.

"How's your faith?" he might as well have been saying, "I know you're looking for something. I know you're seeking. I can see it in your eyes. You're hungry, but you don't know for what; you're looking, but you don't know where to look; you need something, but you're not sure what that is. How's your faith? Lukewarm? Over the hill? Empty? Hidebound? In need of refreshing? A jump start? A new beginning? How's your faith?"

What Jesus does is put himself and the other person in the best position to talk it out: in familiar surroundings, a safe place, on their home turf, literally, breaking bread together, literally, some food, some wine, some conversation. Taking the measure of each other. Seeing where the vulnerabilities are, the hurts, the needs, the fears.

I can imagine Jesus taking it all in—the house, the people, the crowd, the onlookers, the, the skeptics and critics. And the family, the wife, the kids, the in-laws, the friends, the business associates, their circle, and them: Matthew and Zacchaeus. "How's your faith?" A nice, simple, caring question. A starting point. An opening.

Thirty-five years ago I started FOCI, our work in India, "Friends of Christ in India." At the time I first went to India, I had lived a lot, seen a lot, religion-wise. From Billy Graham crusades to televangelists, from revivals to street preachers, from Jehovah's Witnesses at the front door to Mormons; from

people who handed out tracts to scary airport encounters with Hare Krishnas; from Moonies to cults to communes. I had seen it all, heard it all. Hell-fire and brimstone, seduction, manipulation, guilt. And all those people with all those tactics, all claiming to be God's representatives.

So I go to India, I go way off the beaten path, no tourists within 500 miles, and I meet this amazing little Indian man, Azariah, an evangelist, doing this amazing Christian ministry. People are flocking to him. He's starting Churches. He's doing baptisms. He's bringing people to Christ. But there's no guilt, no haranguing, no intimidation. His message was very simple: "Consider Jesus." Sort of an Indian version of George Bush's "How's your faith?" It's gentle, considerate, personal. A friendly invitation: Consider . . . Jesus. Think about it, O.K.? Think about "How's your faith?"

How's your dentist? How's your car? How's your kid? How's your health? How's your summer? Any question that begins that way recognizes there is a way you want something to be, and you're being asked how it is compared to how you want it to be. I want my son to be nice, my health to be good, my kids to be fine, my car to run smoothly, my dentist to be pain free. So, O.K., how does my real-time experience of that measure up to my hope?

So Jesus goes to Matthew and Zacchaeus, and he says, "How's your faith?" "You're Jewish," he's saying, "everyone around you is Jewish. You go to synagogue, you go to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days, you celebrate the festivals, you know the Torah, but you're cheating your neighbors, you're cheating your country, people despise you. You're looking every which way for something, you climbed a tree to see me, you jumped up when I said, 'Follow me.' So let's see if we can close the gap, help you have the faith you want."

That's what my friend Azariah was doing with his suggestion, "Consider Jesus." He dealt with people of every imaginable background, condition, religion, situation, high and low. From rural India to Cambridge, England; from this little Church to the U.S. Congress; from "untouchables" to high-caste Brahmins. I was with him when he talked with Muslims, Hindus, atheists, Communists, and New England Christians, and his approach was always kind, gentle, engaging: "Consider Jesus."

Remember the old-fashioned word "winsome"? It means exactly what it sounds like, a winning manner, something that attracts, that's likable, that helps you want to engage that person. A winsome smile. A winsome personality. My friend Azariah was "winsome" when he invited others to "consider Jesus." President Bush was being "winsome" when he reached out to David Gregory to ask, "How's your faith?" Jesus was "winsome" when he brought himself into the complicated lives of Matthew and Zacchaeus. There was nothing ugly to it,

nothing negative, nothing mean-spirited. Change often comes after meeting such "winsomeness."

Most times when religious people talk about change, we think of conversion, converting someone to our religion, our side. But in all of Jesus's life, there is no example of Jesus getting anyone to change their religion. And the Methodist President Bush only succeeded in helping David Gregory become a better Jew, and as such, a better husband, a better father, a better colleague.

For Matthew, he changed his priorities. He left his safe, secure, profitable government job to follow Jesus. He became one of the 12 disciples, author of one of the Gospels, a key player in those crucial first years of Christianity.

For Zacchaeus, he totally changed his character. Being with Jesus, thinking about how his faith was made Zacchaeus look in the mirror, not like what he saw, and determined to be different from that day on. With great emotion and celebration, Zacchaeus gave half of all he had to the poor, and he set out to make amends to every person he had hurt. He took inventory, a "soul" inventory, he set things right; he charted a new course for his life.

The final piece of this sermon is twofold. It's about you, and it's about everyone in your circle. We can all start by imagining President Bush taking you aside, one on one, and just asking quietly and nicely, friendly, "How's your faith?"

Or, imagine Jesus surprising you at work, or when you think you're alone, and he asks you to have dinner. How would you "consider Jesus" then? Think about your prayer life. Think about your Church life. Think about your beliefs. Think about the space between the spiritual life as it is right now and the spiritual life you'd like to have.

And the last aspect is the people in your circle. We all have a circle. The circle of people we know, people we influence, people we meet. It's not everybody, it's not the whole world, it's not millions. But there are people in your life that you have a connection with, someone who would at least give you the time of day.

What could you say that might get them thinking, might start them on a journey, might push them in the right direction? What could you say, and how would you say it? Azariah won friends all over the world with his simple offer, "Consider Jesus." President Bush shaped the life of a man from way over on the side of the political world with a straightforward "How's your faith?"

Jesus caused Matthew and Zacchaeus to open their hearts by, first of all, first of *all*, opening their doors. They all started a conversation.

I'm going away for a while. Alida is coming with me for a bit, and then she's leaving me behind in central Europe to work on some projects. One of them is our Church's 300th anniversary in seven years. You might wonder why start now. The reason is we want to be worthy of a 300th anniversary. We want to be an alive Church, thriving, effective, strong, ready, willing, and able to be used by God however God needs to use us. We don't want to be dwindling, hanging on. A mere shadow of the good old days.

For that to happen, you and I need to up our game. We need to value our faith to such a degree that others will find our faith "winsome."

Let's listen now as David White sings "How Great Thou Art." You can follow along in your hymnal, No. 33:

*Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed.*

Refrain

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee;
how great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee;
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander,
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:*

Refrain

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in;
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin:*

Refrain

*When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation
and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim, my God, how great thou art!*

Refrain