

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 13, 2019  
Sermon Title: "Twin Sins: Racism and Anti-Semitism"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Galatians 3:26-29

## Galatians 3:26-29

*. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

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This sermon is about racism and anti-Semitism, but it could easily be about any of the "isms" that set one group of people against another for no reasonable reason other than they are that other group.

That's why people now use the word "other" a lot, referring to any body, any group who is thought to be other than us. And if they are "other" than us, then they must be different, and if different, then kept at arm's length in some way. And that can range from literally arm's length to isolation to exclusion to extinction. Jesus actually tackled the idea of "other" very directly: "Do unto *others* as you would have them do unto you."

It is recognized that all through history every people, every tribe, every nation, every group had a mentality of "This is us, you're not; you're something other, different, lesser; you make me nervous, afraid. I don't want you to marry my daughter, go to my school, serve in my army, quarterback my team, live in my neighborhood, be in my circle. You look different, cook different, dress different."

Just look at these four verses from the Bible: the first comes from the Book of Genesis, 4,000 years ago. Joseph is being reunited with his brothers after a long time down in Egypt. Here's the verse: "Joseph came out and ordered his servants to feed everyone dinner. They served the Jewish brothers by themselves, and the

Egyptians ate by themselves because Egyptians could not eat with Jews, for that is detestable to Egyptians." (Genesis 43:32)

That's a strange word, isn't it—*detestable* for Egyptians to eat with Jews? Let's jump ahead 2,000 years. Maybe there's some improvement. In John Chapter 4 Jesus is walking through a village of Samaritans at a time when Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other at all. Let's pick up the story: "Jesus is tired and thirsty, sits down by the village well, when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Jesus says to her, "Will you give me a drink?" The Samaritan woman says, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? For Jews do not associate with Samaritans." (John 4:4-9)

O.K., Well maybe Jesus was nicer. Until, well, Matthew 15:21-28. Jesus goes up to what is now Lebanon, when a Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, what we would now call a Palestinian, she comes to Jesus and says, "Lord, my daughter is suffering. Have mercy on me. Help me!" And Jesus says, "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Preachers have been dancing around that verse forever, but you're still left with Jesus calling the foreign woman a dog.

One more? In Acts 10, the early days of Christianity, Peter has a vision that is meant to knock down all the barriers between Christians and others; and he's still trying to figure it out when he's invited to dinner with a hated pagan Roman centurion. Peter is very blunt. He says to his host, "You are well aware that it is against our law for me, a Jew, to associate with a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call any person, *any person*, impure or unclean." All right. That's a step forward.

Jump ahead to, let's say, the 20th century, when blacks and whites couldn't marry each other or eat at the same lunch counter or swim in the same pool; when Jews weren't welcome here, there, or everywhere; when the KKK and the Nazis co-opted Christian symbols—the cross, for Pete's sake—and Christian pastors and Churches and even Bible verses all co-opted to excuse the worst of plain old racism and anti-Semitism. The "Twin Sins" of my sermon.

Sammy Davis, Jr., the singer/actor Las Vegas "Rat Pack" star of another time, used to say that when it came to prejudice, he had all the bases covered: he was a one-eyed black Jew. And when he said it on "The Johnny Carson Show," we all laughed because when someone prejudicial tells a joke about prejudice, we feel better, as though progress is being made. "See, he's laughing. Things must be better."

Progress has been made, no doubt about it. Not as much as needed. Not as much as we think, but let's acknowledge that America as a people, as a culture, as a nation of laws, is better almost generation by generation.

All across the landscape of this nation, from the grass roots to the White House, people made monumental efforts to achieve Dr. Martin Luther King's dream that "One day we will all be judged by the content of our character, not the color of our skin"; nor by any of the other ways people try to divide us. Religion. Politics. Age. Sexuality. Gender. Yes, even region, looks, income, the car you drive, the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the bumper stickers and lawn signs you display. Enough already. Enough. The "Twin Sins" need to go into the dustbin of history.

As I said last week, a sin means to literally miss the mark like an archer missing a target. And what makes a sin a sin is that God sets the mark. God is the target, and when you miss it, when you fall short of God's mark, or you veer off God's target, that's a sin. That's the first half of the classic Christian definition of sin, missing God's mark; and the second half is the logical follow-up: separation from God. If God, or God's will, is the target, and you missed the target, there is a distance between where God wants you to be and where you end up. It's just that simple: if you aim for here, and you end up there, there's that much difference between you, right?

I once went to visit my father on Staten Island. I'm driving along. I see a sign, "Welcome to Pennsylvania." See what I mean? When you make a mistake, you put distance between where you're supposed to be and where you end up.

What I've just said to you is so central to historic 2,000-year-old Christianity that I'm going to repeat a quick version of it: Sin is when you miss God's target for your life, and you end up distant from God, emotionally, spiritually. It's real. You feel it. We can sin as individuals, we can sin as groups we are part of, we can sin as a nation. If whatever we're part of misses God's mark, then we end up at a distance from God.

I've called the sermon "The Twin Sins: Racism and Anti-Semitism" because, well, they are twins, and they are sins. They are not serial maladies or personal preferences or cultural quirks or old-time habits. We are in Church, and I want to use a Church word to get your attention. And "sin" is a really big Church word.

We've talked about the classic definition of sin. Well, the classic definition of hell is "separation from God." And we imagine that in different ways. God is here, and you're roasting in hell. Or God is here, and you're being punished in some way. Or God is here, and you're not going to wake up, ever, after you die. Or God is here, and you're not. End of story. It's all logical. If I rob your house or I violate you in

some way, your trust, your home, your life, you're not going to want to be close with me. My behavior creates a distance between us. Same with God. Those twin sins "create distance."

The rest of Christian theology tries to bridge that gap. Whether it's the threat of hell or the promise of heaven or the giving of offerings or going on pilgrimages; or whether it's talking about grace or forgiveness or confession, it's all designed to bring God and us back together. Even in our Church, we start every Sunday, practically at the beginning, with the Confession. And then we are declared forgiven. Clean slate. Fresh start. A Mulligan.

Why am I telling you this today? Well, look at the title: "Twin Sins: Racism and anti-Semitism." It is long past time that we acknowledge, we recognize, we state clearly that those two lingering things are really sins. They miss God's mark. They create separation from God. They hurt us. They hurt America. And we need to confess it, be forgiven, and start fresh.

It's not enough to go, "Oops!" Or say, "That's how I was brought up," or, "Well, in my neighborhood, we always said . . ." Or some kind of cultural euphemism to explain it all away.

The first time I went to India 36 years ago, a young man said to me, tapping me me hard on the chest, "Don't come to India and lecture us about wife burning. That's part of our culture." I tapped him even harder. "That's not culture," I said. "That's sin."

Racism and anti-Semitism need to enter that category: not culture, sin. We accept the obvious, don't we, that killing someone is sin? But killing someone's spirit is in the same category of sin; it creates distance between you/us and part of God's creation. Any act that distances you from God and any of God's creation is sin. Those Twin Sins have been killing people and killing people's spirit for centuries.

I've been thinking about this sermon a long time, preparing for it my whole life. So have you. I know you. You are a thoughtful, caring, faithful, aware people. So I don't need to flood this sermon with 20 stories of active Twin Sins to convince you. You know. You hear it on talk radio, in pop culture; politicians, athletes; locker room talk, drunken talk, casual talk, casual jokes. Sometimes obvious. Sometimes subtle. Dog whistles, from "welfare queen" to "Jewish money," from targeting Michelle Obama to George Soros.

We know what is meant. It tops out because it's still in us; it hasn't been cleansed. It's time, long past time, to cleanse it. When we participate, when we permit, when we stay silent, we sin.

It's not just somebody misspoke or a poor choice of words. It is missing God's mark. It separates us from God. It is a sin. Let's own up.

In thinking about the sermon, I scoured my own life for evidence, and it was easy. I have witnessed those Twin Sins in every decade of my life, in every place I've lived, in every school I attended. It's in both political parties, it's in Church and state, it's in sports, clubs, professions. It's in today's news, yesterday's news and probably next week's news. Why? Because it's alive and well. It's permitted, protected, exploited

The most telling for me was the KKK/neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, two summers ago. Remember it well. Those people came from around the country to protest the removal of Confederate statues and symbols from Charlottesville. They were there to protect the honor and history, their idea of white people. It was a race issue. Race. Black/white. Civil War. Slavery. Jim Crow statues meant to honor a war to keep slaves, and to honor statues to keep blacks in their place.

They were clear. All this was to happen on a Saturday. So what did all these angry white men do with their Friday night? They lit torches and had a torchlight parade in front of a synagogue, chanting Nazi slogans. August 2017 in one of the great college towns of America. They couldn't keep their hatred straight. Even their racism had at its soul anti-Semitism. Twin Sins.

Let's face it. Evidence of it is everywhere. Signs of progress against them are everywhere. Signs of their resilience are everywhere

So . . . what's the way forward? Is there a way forward? I used to be a Baptist pastor in New York City, so I mostly hung out with other Baptist pastors. And at almost every meeting, one of the great old-time African-American Baptist pastors would ask, "Is there any word from the Lord?" In other words, "What's God got to say to us today?" In truth, that's the everyday Christian question we should all be asking. "Is there any word from the Lord?"

The answer is "paradigm shift." I remember the first time I heard that at a conference. I had no idea what they were talking about. But it's simple: you used to think about things this way, but now you think about things another way. You've shifted your perspective, your frame of reference, the lens, the framework through which you look.

Christianity is meant to be that lens, that frame of reference, that perspective. Jesus sets that in motion when he sits with every outcast, physical, social, religious political, touching and being touched by all the types of unclean people

of his time. The wrong side of politics, the wrong side of religion, the wrong side of gender, the wrong side of popularity, the wrong side of the tracks, wherever the wrong side was, Jesus was; and whoever was on the wrong side was alongside Jesus. St. Paul put Jesus's actions into words, thus our Scripture lesson for today: "In Christ, because of Christ, through Christ, thinking like Christ, being Christlike, there is no more Jew, no more Greek, no more slave, no more free, no more male, no more female."

We have a new way of thinking about ourselves and a new way of looking at everybody else. The problem isn't being those things; the problem is thinking we're only those things. God made us for more

We live in a time of "identity politics," of hyper-identity, which may seem to fly in the face of being "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female," but let me say two things about identity:

No. 1, it was always there. I grew up in New York, the great "melting pot" city of the great "melting pot" of America. And everywhere I looked, there were identities: the Polish-American Club, the Italian-American Club, the Greek Orthodox Church, the French Huguenot Church, the Swedish Lutheran Church, the German Lutheran Church. Long before these DNA home-testing kits, we knew who everybody was. Hyper-identity is nothing new.

No. 2, there are lots of new identities now because lots of identities were squashed in the old days—hidden, minimized, delegitimized. Now folks are saying, "I'm here too. I'm proud. Look me in the eye."

I've been your pastor for 21 years, and there are many distinctive traits of our Church. But here's one I especially like. Whenever families come to Church with kids—4-, 5-, 10-, 12-year-olds—they come out the door to greet me, and when I talk to the kids, the parent will say, "Shake David's hand, and look him in the eye." And they'll make sure it happens. Those parents, you parents, are preparing your children for the wider world, for when they first try out for a high school team, for their first college tour, for their first job interview, for their lifetime of meeting other people. And you want them to meet the world showing respect, and looking them in the eye, not cowering with fear. Not "lording it over" anybody. Just, "Here I am, nice to meet you."

Christianity is the religious equivalent of telling your kid, "Shake their hand, look them in the eye. See one another through the eyes of Christ." We humans have spent our whole history setting up barriers: my people, my clan, my tribe, my religion, my race, insulating, isolating. This is such an anathema to what Christianity is supposed to stand for. St. Paul says it so beautifully: "For Christ is

our peace who has made us one by destroying the wall of hostility that divides us." (Ephesians 2:14)

*The wall of hostility that divides us.* The whole purpose of a wall, any wall, is to limit our view. But Jesus breaks down the walls that limit our view of this person as black, this person as gay, this person as rich, this person as female, this person as worthwhile, this person as not.

Instead, we see each other through Christ. As someone that God created. As someone that Jesus loved. As someone that you value and treasure. We see each other in the fullness of who they are, not some quick checklist of the obvious tall/short, like me/not like me. We don't lose identity. We enrich identity. A "paradigm shift."

Some years ago I was having lunch with a group of women in Flatbush, Brooklyn. They were going on at length about their "changing neighborhood," black people moving in, increased crime. They'd all been mugged. The black teenagers so terrifying. I don't know what got to me to ask for more details, but I did, and it turned out, yes, they'd all been mugged . . . by white teenagers. *They'd all been mugged by white teenagers.* But they weren't going to let facts get in the way of racism. Racism was stronger, creating separation between them and their new neighbors, and God.

Enough already. *Enough.*

Let's close with Hymn No. 687, written by one of my favorites, John Oxenham, "In Christ There Is No East or West"

*In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one community of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In Christ shall true hearts ev'rywhere  
their high communion find;  
his service is the golden cord,  
close binding humankind.*

*Join hands, disciples of the faith,  
whate'er your race may be;  
all children of the living God  
are surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both east and west,  
in him meet south and north:  
all loving hearts are one in him  
throughout the whole wide earth.*