

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 1, 2020  
Sermon Title: "Smoothing Our Rough Edges"  
Scripture: 2 Corinthians: 7:1  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## 2 Corinthians 7:1

*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.*

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People think that Alida and I make a good team; we must work together hand in glove, planning everything just so. Not really. A lot of times, like with preaching, she does her thing, and I do mine. Which made Ash Wednesday quite amazing for me. We'd been giving out ashes all day in various venues and settings and services. Not together, separately. Until our evening service. Alida was the preacher, and two minutes into the sermon it was clear: she was preaching this same sermon I'm preaching today! Same message. Same purpose. Different stories.

Alida began by retelling the story of the popular Bill Murray movie, "Groundhog Day," back in the news because it was turned into the most popular Super Bowl ad this year. The basic theme of "Groundhog Day" is that Bill Murray is the thoroughly obnoxious, arrogant, self-centered pig who is cursed to wake up every morning at 6 AM only to discover that it's the same day or the day before, "Groundhog Day."

His exasperation grows with the turn of the calendar that never turns until he finally figures it all out. He needs to change. To change what needs changing, stop what needs stopping. The lies. The sexism. The temper. The ego. Which is precisely where I decided to go today. Self-improvement. Fixing ourselves. Being better. After all, it's Lent, isn't it? The six-and-a-half weeks leading up to Easter. We remember that Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. He gave things up to get clearer. He faced temptations head on and stood fast. He turned his back on the Devil. Literally.

That's where we get the idea of giving something up for Lent (or taking something up). There's some habit we've always thought of giving up or at least cutting back, curtailing. So we use Lent to give it a try. Or maybe there's some beneficial activity we've always thought we should do or at least try. So we use Lent to jumpstart a new habit.

We're trying to improve ourselves one step at a time. Lent is good for that because it starts with Ash Wednesday, a stark and physical reminder of our mortality. We don't live forever. So there is no time like the present to improve yourself.

I gave ashes to one man, and I said, "God bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." He said to me, "But you're supposed to tell me I'm going to die; 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' say that." So I gave him some more ashes and said "Ashes to ashes, you're going to die." And he was pleased. He had his motivation for another year to be better.

I had a great athletic career. I'm not saying I was a great athlete, but I sure had a lot of fun playing all the 1950s New York City-style sports. Long baseball career. Lots of playground basketball, endless pick-up games. Plus stickball, punch ball, stoop ball, box ball. When my competitive days ended, I became an obsessive-compulsive runner, every day for 40 years.

The end result is today, I'm mostly held together by tape and titanium. Tape, seriously. "Kinesiology Tape," they call it, "KT." You put on some part of your body that's in trouble, pull it tight, attaching it to another part, and all the tears and micro-fractures bind up so tight, they feel good. I learned this a year ago when I couldn't walk, even with my artificial knees. My world-renowned doctor at Hospital for Special Surgery said, in the nicest way possible, "Stop whining. You're a wimp! Start exercising. And here's some tape. Wrap yourself up, and put some over your mouth." So I started physical therapy with those wonderful people who keep Humpty Dumpty together.

My physical therapist is Rick Prenetta here in Fairfield, and he's also a gemologist. He hunts for stones that catch his eye, polishes and shapes them into jewelry and sculptures, including this one I borrowed for today. Stones and gems are often dirty, crusted, cracked, sharp-edged, and rough-hewn. Something you might easily ignore, undervalue, walk on by. But my friend Rick sees its potential. A little washing, brushing, scraping, polishing, and presto! I've been there at the beginning of the process and at the end.

While stretching my body into Spiderman contortions, he'll pluck some nondescript rock from his pocket to show me. Plain. Sometimes ugly. Three weeks later, while I'm hooked up to some electromagnetic machine bombarding

my knees, he'll bring his finished product over to a client, present it as a work of art, all of us in awe at the transition.

That's Lent. That's Christianity. That's conversion. That's all those wonderful old religious terms: repentance, born again, sanctification, regeneration.

You start out as a dirty rough-edged rock. You end up a precious jewel in the kingdom of God. That's really the whole of history of Jesus's ministry. Transformation. He never left people the way he found them.

To take just one category, lepers. Jesus took them at their worst and turned them into their best. Social lepers. Physical lepers. Spiritual lepers. People everyone avoided, nobody liked; people that filled normal folks with fear, disgust, disdain. People assumed to be cursed.

In Jesus's ministry that included a divorced woman, a boy with epilepsy, a woman viewed as unclean, a child dismissed as a foreigner, a man known for cheating his clients, a person on the wrong side of politics, a man not in his right mind, a woman with a bad reputation, someone who showed up at the wrong time, along with actual lepers with a scary disease and social stigma. To each, Jesus offered a new way of being, a new way of thinking about themselves, a new way for others to look at them.

Jesus met with people who were irritating, offensive, abusive, arrogant, willfully dense, cynical, demanding, angry, afraid, skeptical, jealous, insincere, seeking, sorrowing, slandering. And he left them different, better, improved, helped. If they were open to it.

Now, this isn't meant to guilt-trip you. I'm not saying you need to be better. I'm wanting you to want to be better. What our Church does with our emphasis on Christlikeness is to raise your sights to set the bar higher than mediocrity or getting by. You're better than that. You're worth more than. That's why we read that great verse together from St. Paul, who says, "Dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything, everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness." (2 Corinthians 7:1)

That's quite a combination of words: "purify," "perfect," "holiness," get rid of anything that "contaminates."

Friday night I was listening to a program about Maya Angelou, the great American writer. Oprah Winfrey recalled being at an elegant party hosted by Angelou. Everybody was having a good time, when across the room one partier began telling a loud joke about gay people. Maya Angelou tinkled her glass to get everyone's attention, walked over to the couple and escorted them out of her

house. She had some standards. Then, Maya Angelou told about being on the set of a major film in which she had a cameo. The young star of the film, Tupac Shakur, spent the whole day cursing, vulgar, one gross, filthy word after another. The next day it was the same thing. So the elderly Maya Angelou took the young rapper by the elbow, escorted him away from the crowd, and spoke to him firmly and lovingly about dignity. About respect. About representing the best of their people. He broke down and wept. She was lifting his sights.

It's a great parallel to St. Peter, who says, "Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with God." (2 Peter 3:14) I like how Peter begins, "Make every effort." It takes work, effort, and concentration to be "spotless and blameless." Our default mode is usually way short of "spotless," "blameless," "purity," or "holiness." But who wants to go through life in "default mode"? That's a life half-lived at best. Better to go for it. That's what God has always wanted from us. To go for it at our best.

That's why God said to the Israelites, "Be holy because I am holy." (Leviticus 11:45) Peter said the same thing. "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and Godly lives." (1 Peter 3:11) And the clincher, the epitome, Jesus says, "Be ye perfect, even as God is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

On Thursday, driving down Route 95, I listened to a long interview with Al Leiter. Leiter was a superb pitcher for the Yankees and Mets and is now a broadcaster for Major League Baseball. He was being asked about all the various issues that go into pitching like what if the ball is too smooth? Or too juiced? Or you don't like your catcher or you want another catcher? Or the manager is not using you the way you want? Or the batter is too fidgety; the weather is too cold, or too hot—all that stuff. "None of that matters," he said, "Just do your job." He repeated that that at least four times. "Do your job." "My job," he said, "was to make the best pitch, the best location for that situation. And if I missed, do it on the next pitch."

That's us, folks, you and me. That's what Greenfield Hill Church is all about. That's what Christlikeness means. Our job is "to make the best pitch in the best location for that situation. And if we miss, we do it on the next pitch."

The whole world, the Christian world, the Church world can mostly be divided into two groups, those who keep trying to "make the best pitch," and those who couldn't care less.

You know as well as I do, there are people who like to hurt, like to divide, like to cause trouble or don't care if they do. Contemporary culture even applauds such people, saying, "Well, they always speak their mind." Or, "they don't care what anybody thinks," as though that's a good thing, no matter what.

Our two daughters, Camaron and Brigitta, played field hockey, 17 years between them. That's a lot of games we watched, and we still don't understand the whistles. But one custom was crystal clear. Before every game the girls lined up, and the refs went up and down the line, checking every girl—from rings to bracelets to necklaces and hair clips and earrings—all had to come off. Anything that could hurt. Anything with a sharp edge, a rough edge, anything pointed: gone.

Or, in the language of the Bible, "Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right and pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—excellent or praiseworthy—think about those things." (Philippians 4:8)

In that same spirit, our final hymn imagines God as a master potter, reshaping and reworking us into the best we can be. No. 588, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord."

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.  
Mold me and make me after thy will,  
while I am waiting, yielded and still.*

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Search me and try me, Savior today!  
Wash me just now, Lord, wash me just now,  
as in thy presence humbly I bow.*

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Wounded and weary, help me I pray!  
Power, all power, surely is thine!  
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!*

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.  
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see  
Christ only, always, living in me!*