

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 17, 2021  
Sermon: "A Christian's Response to Black Lives Matter"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Luke 15:4-6; Galatians 5:13-15

## **Luke 15:4-6**

*'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."*

## **Galatians 5:13-15**

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

## **PART I – Explanation**

Everyone says if you have to explain a joke, it's not a good joke. And the same should go for sermons. If I have to explain this sermon, maybe it's not a good sermon. With that warning, here's my explanation. Some matters require more depth than you get in a sermon. So I deal with a lot of that in extended writings.

Two years ago, we were all concerned about divisions in America, so I wrote a long essay, 60-plus pages, trying to come at it from every angle. *My America*, I called it. I have a new book coming out in a year, *My Jesus*. It's already 300 pages. There's a book of mine in the Narthex, *What It Means to Be a Church*, that's 200 pages.

My new essay, "A Christian's Response to Black Lives Matter," joins another long list of nouns, verbs, and adjectives joined together to help us think through something really important. The title is timely, referencing "Black Lives Matter," but the real subject is timeless: Racism.

The tendency of exclusion, superiority, scapegoating, even slavery, is universal. That's the whole basis of the caste system in India, tribalism in Africa, conflicts between dark black skin and light black skin in Haiti. Or, in South America—who's descended from Spaniards and who's from the Indigenous people. And depending on your various factors, you're up or down, in or out, accepted or rejected.

But this is America, and our weak spot, our brokenness, our sin is racism. It's been here a long time, and its persistence is baffling, troubling, astounding. You know the routine. Every few months, something bad happens that puts racism front and center; then other stuff happens, pushing it aside until another bad thing happens, and everybody takes notice. On and on like that. The current spotlight is the result of several tragic shootings of Black people in quick succession: George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. Jacob Blake.

The accumulated sorrow, anger, and horror created a groundswell for Black Lives Matter, which actually began as a movement several years ago. But while America was hunkered down amid the Covid shutdown, the deaths of these young Black people exploded across our national consciousness. You remember: street protests across America, even right here in Fairfield; chants for remembrance, chants for change, "Black Lives Matter" street signs.

And, sadly, vandalism, riots, and violence from the left and the right, besmirching hopes and ideals. What surprised me was an uprising of concern among people I didn't think gave a hoot: prominent college football and basketball coaches, famous TV preachers and megachurch pastors, popular conservatives and evangelicals, standing up, speaking out, and actually using the language of the protests: systemic, racism, privilege, Black Lives Matter. Especially in the days before rioting and looting began, there was this common agreement across the land, racism is alive and well and needs to be confronted once and for all.

There was a period there, about six weeks, my head was spinning with all that was happening about racism, good and bad, silly and profound, inspiring and troubling, hopeful and discouraging. So, I started to write, wanting to provide you, my Church family, with as full a review of the issues as I could. Breadth and depth in a manageable, timely way.

I address "Black Lives Matter" as a movement, a slogan, a reality. I looked at the Bible and race. I have 10 "micro-chapters" on every racism subject I can think of that people bring up: What about Black-on-Black crime? Confederate statues and flags? White privilege and White allies? Reparations? Riots? And our police? All that, plus a hopeful ending in 54 pages, for free! I learned that with my last essay: nothing sells better than being free. To make it accessible, there are four plans: the hard copy that you can find in the narthex and at the Church office; or

contact the office and Roni will email you a PDF version. And in a week or so, I'll have a YouTube sort of "TED Talk" on it, maybe 30 minutes long. Plus, today's sermon, which is more of an overview.

And who knows what else?

## **Part II - Sermon**

I grew up in a family where the only purpose of dinner was debate. It didn't matter the topic: baseball or God, Eisenhower or Kennedy, Civil Rights or Vietnam, whether the sky is blue or not. Talk it out. Be prepared to listen, and when you speak, be prepared to back it up. And don't forget that I love you, even while I'm shouting. And feel free to shout back . . . lovingly!

A sermon mostly comes about in two ways. Maybe there's a Bible verse or a story that I think we need to think through. For example, "Forgiveness." On the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Perhaps the topic of forgiveness has kept popping up in my life as a pastor—whom to forgive, how to forgive, when to forgive?

So you turn on your computer for an online worship or show up in Church, and there I am, preaching on forgiveness. For the other kind of sermon, maybe events take over us, and we need, as a Church, to deal with it. September 11<sup>th</sup>. Newtown. Covid. These things happen that touch us all, and it would be malpractice for us not to preach about it.

In Protestantism, preaching is the center of worship, and if the center of our worship won't touch the center of what we're dealing with, what good are we? And it's fair to say, since mid-March, our national lives have been centered on Covid and a reckoning with racism. And sadly, we can add the election and post-election. But, God help us, that's for another day.

In short, racism rears its ugly head and mocks us, threatens us, dares us. As if to say, O.K., Church, O.K., religion, O.K., you followers of Christ, O.K., you lovers of America, whaddya say? Whaddya got? Whaddya gonna do? And then, racism just laughs.

I've been writing this essay since April. Writing. Correcting. Editing. Cutting. And I'm embarrassed to say I didn't find this verse until Friday morning. Galatians 5:13-15: "You were called to be free." That's a great word, isn't it? "Free." Most people would call that the bedrock of America. "You were called to be free." But, St. Paul goes on, "Do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

Greater minds than mine have reminded us, "Freedom isn't free." Nor is it license to hurt others, to unfree others. As Christ's people, our freedom is found in love. We are "free to serve one another in love," Paul adds, based on perhaps the wisest Bible verse of all: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

That's in the Galatians verse. That's in Jesus's teaching. That's in the Jewish Torah. That's a basic Judeo-Christian teaching that a lot of Americans like to say America is based on. So there it is, plain as day.

"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." In my essay I link that with its twin verse, "The Golden Rule": "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." You put those two together, that about decides it! They answer the question right there, do Black lives matter? Do all lives matter? Do Blue lives matter? Does my old White life matter? Moses's Torah, Jesus's teachings, St. Paul's epistles all shout a resounding "Yes." They matter equally to you, your neighbor, and God. They answer every aspect of racism, every aspect of unfairness, injustice, unkindness I can think of. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Wherever you are, whomever you're with, whatever you're doing, whenever the occasion is there, treat somebody the way you want to be treated.

Years ago, when feminism was on the rise and my daughter was growing up, I said, "All it takes to make a man a feminist is to have a daughter who wants to do something." A person may not want to call themselves a feminist; they may be macho, even chauvinistic to the bone, but there isn't a father worth the name who doesn't want his daughter to fulfill her dreams.

People of color want the same. They want to dream their dreams without their color denying them their dreams. But the last phrase in that Galatians verse is the ultimate hammer: "If you keep on biting and devouring each other," St. Paul wrote, "watch out . . . or you'll be destroyed by each other."

Oh . . . my . . . goodness! How much truth is right there? Human beings have been "biting and devouring each other," and what's it gotten them? Over religion, class, color; over greed, power, lust; over ego, politics, pride?

Two white citizen vigilantes murdered Ahmaud Arbery. A policeman strangled George Floyd to death. A rioter in the U.S. Capitol killed a policeman with a fire extinguisher. "Watch out," the Bible says, "or you will be destroyed by each other."

As you read my essay, and as you perhaps respond to it, remember the title: "A Christian's Response to Black Lives Matter." So the first word is "A." That means me. I'm not speaking for you or the whole world. It's one person. Me.

Next, it says "Christian." I'm not writing as a neutral observer of partisan politics or from the point of view of economics or law. I'm writing from within the framework of trying to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. And before you tell me that's not doable, or practical, or easy, let me assure you I know that! I fail at it every day of my life.

But it's still the gold standard by which we live. And for those who claim America was founded as a Christian nation, or on Judeo-Christian principles, or needs to return to its Christian roots—well, O.K., then, let's do it. Let's do the Jesus of Nazareth way. That would end racism by noon today.

As late winter, early spring, and summer unfolded, as Black Lives Matter dominated the news cycle, I got a Facebook post from my son Aaron. This is right at the time when everyone was taking sides about the phrase "Black Lives Matter." Should it be capitalized? Can we say, "All Lives Matter"? Or "Blue Lives Matter"? Should we paint it on Main Streets and avenues? Wear it on T-shirts? Is Black Lives Matter a movement, a slogan, a scam, or a truth? My son's Facebook post was about Jesus's Parable of the Lost Sheep. A shepherd has 100 sheep. One gets lost, separated from the flock. The shepherd leaves the 99 and searches high and low for the one lost sheep. The shepherd isn't satisfied until that sheep is fully restored to the 99. The post went on to declare Jesus's parable doesn't devalue the 99. But it reminds us of God's math:  $1=99$ . The one is as important to God as the 99. As long as the one is in peril, as long as the one isn't as safe as the 99, then God can't rest in peace . . . nor can we.

Black Lives Matter has its fans and its critics. Just like the January 6<sup>th</sup> protest at the U.S. Capitol. At the U.S. Capitol there were people who prayed the Lord's Prayer and waved the American flag. And there was a policeman murdered, a protester trampled to death, and much more destroyed than furniture. Protests are like that. And because of the drama, we decide to be for or against a movement or a slogan.

So I'll close by bringing it home, making it personal. The day George Floyd was killed, a young person of color from this Church, from our Church family, wrote this: "I am crying and I still feel alone. I'm thinking that when I drive to work tomorrow, I'll still be alone. And hopefully, I won't get pulled over because I will feel alone again. I'm just tired of it all. I'm so tired of being tired: Where are my friends? Whatever happened to "Am I my brother's keeper?" When does it stop? What does it take? When is enough enough?" (p. 49)

If, instead of quoting that young person, if, instead of writing it in my essay, if that young person were here in our Church today, up here in the pulpit with me, saying it all to you, eye to eye, would we hem and haw? Would we quibble about

Black Lives Matter? Would we ask about where the funding comes from—China or Iran or George Soros?

Or would we each make our own way to the altar, come right up here, Covid notwithstanding, and hug together, weep together, and say with assurance, "Your Black life matters as much as my own?"

Let's conclude with our final hymn, "In Christ There Is No East or West"

*In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship 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, then, people 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 Christly souls are joined as one  
throughout the whole wide earth.*