

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon: "Perfection"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scriptures: Scripture Litany

Scripture Litany

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.

Galatians 3:28-29

You know what the Lord requires: Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Matthew 7:12

Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Luke 10:28

Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to, for we are one body, though we don't all do the same thing.

Romans 12:3-4

God shows no partiality . . . no arbitrary favoritism.

Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11

But let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Amos 5:24

Be ye perfect.

Matthew 5:48

INTRODUCTION

I have a particular challenge today. I have this essay, that's one sort of thing. And I have a discussion class after Church today about the essay, and that's another sort of thing. And in between I have today's sermon, and that's a third entirely different sort of thing. A sermon is not an essay. A sermon is not a plug for some essay or book I've written. A sermon is not an opinion piece or an editorial. A sermon is supposed to be a proclamation, specifically a proclamation of God's word for the day, what God would have us think about.

In one of my books, I tell of being a guest preacher at a wonderful historic Church near Baltimore. The pulpit was way high up above the congregation with a long

winding staircase to reach it. When it was time to preach, I climbed the stairs, and just as I got eye-level to the pulpit, there was a sign there on the pulpit, facing me, that declared: "We would see Jesus." *We would see Jesus*. In other words, get over yourself. People don't come to Church to see me.

So, today's sermon is not about me. The essay is, in large part. It's even called "A Christian's Response to Black Lives Matter." The "A" in the title lets you know it's from me. It's one person's take. It's what I think. It's what I know. It's what I believe. It's personal.

The second word is "Christian." A "Christian's" response That lets you know that I'm looking at racism as a spiritual matter, as a function of the soul, or faith, that it is appropriately a Church issue that Christlikeness pushes us into this struggle. And whenever I write—and you know this by now—whenever I write, all my books, all my essays, all my pastoral letters, they're not top-down things. They're not me telling you off. They're always designed to encourage your thoughts, your response.

And never in my life have I gotten this level of response. Over 300 pages of emails, letters, texts, materials sent to me: thoughtful, powerful, personal, faithful, even tough, heart wrenching, sorrowful, and hopeful.

We've sent out over 700 copies, and I have responses from over 150 people, an unheard of level of response. It says to me, racism, racial healing, Black lives, your life, my life, our lives together matter. A lot. Everybody wants some action . . . steps to take, something they can do. I heard it from a 13-year-old Tuesday and a 95-year-old on Thursday. "Give us some steps." So my answer is: read . . . watch . . . listen . . . talk.

The experience of Black people, the experience of people of color, the experience of racism, the impact *and* facts *and* the way forward is abundant and accessible to all of us. Read a book. Watch a movie. Listen to a conversation. Talk to somebody who knows racism from the inside.

I'll close this introductory part with a small story. Do you know how the Dogwood Festival became famous? Because years and years ago, Eleanor Roosevelt came to the Dogwood Festival, and then she wrote about it in her newspaper column. Do you know about the famous Marian Anderson Easter concert on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939? Anderson was one of the world's greatest opera stars, but she was not allowed to sing in D.C. to an integrated audience, not even at a local high school. Until Eleanor Roosevelt wrote about her in her newspaper column. That broke the logjam, and on Easter, Marian Anderson sang before 75,000 people, the largest attendance ever at the

Lincoln Memorial, breaking the record held by . . . the KKK. Jesus was right. We can move mountains.

SERMON

Jesus didn't leave things the way they were. He wasn't a status quo guy. He was an upsetter of apple carts, a questioner, a provocateur, a change agent. He questioned tradition, religion, authority, prejudice. He questioned his mother, for Pete's sake; and his friends; and, in one dark moment, even God.

Jesus was old-school. I'm old-school. When I think back over my greatest teachers, coaches, mentors, none of them was an "attaboy" backslapper. They were all pushers, controllers, motivators, the old-fashioned way.

In fact, I'm writing a Lenten Devotional about my best baseball coach, Al Dam, which was a good name for him—short, curt, to the point, with a nice emphatic "Dam" at the end. He was demanding, Marine Corps tough, and never expected anything but the best from us.

Parents didn't like him. Other coaches despised him. We ballplayers loved him. Kids on other teams wished they played for him. His mantra was pretty simple: "You should be better than you are. You can be better than you are, even if you think you're pretty good already, and I'm here to make you better." Which is Jesus's approach with you and me, with us as a Church and a society, with America as a nation, and the world at large.

We're "created," the Bible says, just a bit lower than the angels." (Hebrews 2:6-7) We are made for excellence. We are expected to excel. "Be ye perfect," Jesus said, not one of his more popular sayings, a "dare, double-dare you," "throw down the gauntlet challenge," if I ever heard one. "Be ye perfect." That's verse 48 of Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount."

In that sermon, shorter than this one, he tackles anger, worry, lust, vengeance, hypocrisy, pride, greed, murder, cheating, prejudice, stupidity! And, like my old Coach Al Dam, Jesus says, "You know you can do better," with that startling challenge, "Be ye perfect." Perfection is the result of two things. One, knowing you're not; and two, hard work to fix what's not.

Remember those scriptures we read a moment ago; and remember why they're scriptures in the first place. Scriptures have a place of priority in every religion. Our scriptures are even in a book called the Holy Bible. So when we do a scripture reading, it's like shouting, "Hey, pay attention, this matters!"

In many Churches, the scripture readings begin with, "Hear the Word of the Lord," or end with, "This is the Word of the Lord." Centuries, millennia of tradition, experience, faith, and practice add to the power and the aura of scripture. So today's verses should wake us up. The whole Church, more than half our nation, all of Christendom, more than half of the world should take notice.

The topic of today's sermon is racism, but the overarching theme is excellence, being the best we can be, aiming for perfection. And today's scriptures lay it out: *"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.* (Galatians 3:28-29)

Or, as Sly and the Family Stone sang, and the old Pittsburgh Pirates declared, "We are family!"

"You know what the Lord requires: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Meaning, God is pretty clear. We have no excuse for not getting it.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12) Does religion get any simpler than that? *"Love your neighbor as you love yourself."* (Mark 12:31) O.K., that's simpler.

"Do not think more highly of yourself than you should, for we are one body." (Romans 12:3-4) Check your ego. We're all in this together.

"God is no respecter of persons, shows no partiality, no favoritism." (Romans 2:11) Yes, God lumps us all together—as his children.

"Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." I guess God isn't kidding about justice.

"Be ye perfect." Yep. Aim high.

I'd say we've got our work cut out for us. But work is our middle name in America; we love it, we honor it, we do it. So if it's going to take work to be the Church, the people, the nation God intends it, let's do it.

Someone sent me an interview with the comedian Jon Stewart, talking about America, and he said, "America is not natural. Natural is tribal! [In America] we are fighting against thousands of years of human behavior and history. That's what's exceptional about America. This ain't easy." (VOX, 11/18/16)

What he's saying is American exceptionalism is an idea that takes work. You don't just get up in the morning, roll out of bed, and everything is exceptional. You work, you strive, you contribute to make it exceptional. We don't rest on our laurels. We don't mourn the "good old days." American exceptionalism isn't about yesterday. It's today's efforts for tomorrow. Christlikeness, as we call it in our Church, is about becoming the very best we can be. God gives us certain opportunities. Take them. God gives us, each of us, certain talents, interests. Use them. God gives us certain opportunities. Take them. God gives us challenges. Meet them.

Whatever it is you do or are a part of, you bring your best to it, don't you? You play golf. You eat at a restaurant. You go to work. You visit a neighbor. You help as a volunteer. You are a citizen. You are an American. You are alive now. You bring your best to it, right?

Forget racism for a minute. Wipe it from your mind. Now, think of even one other issue that matters to you, anything of concern to you, to our society, to our time, anything of importance to you. Whatever it is, don't you think it can be better? Or perhaps don't you think it better be better? Don't you want it to be better? Doesn't matter if it's your company, or your profession, or your favorite teams; or charity, the environment, or the Metro North. You want it better. You know it can be better. Race, ethnicity, color—they cover a full range of American experience.

I haven't made this sermon about my essay because the essay speaks for itself. I poured a lifetime of living into it, thousands and thousands of pages of reading, years of listening, decades of experiencing, revisiting the worst of our racial history, hearing from the best, seeing it, meeting it.

My essay is called "A Christian's Response" because it is from me, one person; it is what I think, what I know, what I believe. But a sermon is about us. What we need to know. What we are supposed to believe, what we can do.

Greater minds than mine are working on the problem of racism. Economists are pointing out the damage to the economy when millions have yet to succeed, thrive, earn, spend.

The medical profession tells us the cost to human life in Black and brown families. From infant health to Covid. Lawyers are pleading about our legal system, justice inequities, the "prison industrial complex." Educators are begging us to help raise the kids to have a fighting chance to excel. Patriots are acknowledging that we can't achieve our greatness while pushing away whole segments of people. But I base my appeal to you in my essay and this sermon on our religious faith. This is Church, after all. We're here for worship, to honor God. And the best way to honor God is to honor the fullness of God's creation.

There's nothing I hate more than riding my stationary bike. I really hate it. So I watch a lot of really bad TV to pass the time. On Thursday, I watched "Bar Rescue." Any of you watch "Bar Rescue"? Exactly what it sounds like. A hard-edged businessman is brought in to save, to rescue, to make profitable a bar.

Usually by the time this unusual consultant arrives, the bar has descended into dive status: rotten food, lousy drinks, lazy staff, falling profit. This episode featured a particularly bad pizza tavern. The business guy watches on hidden cameras, then bursts in and cleans up, wipes out, transforms, resurrects. But before he busts in and knocks heads—figuratively—he says into the camera: "When I understand failure, I can find the path to success." *When I understand failure, I can find the path to success.*

Let me be clear: that's Christianity 101. It's also Business 101, Sports 101, Parenting 101, Science 101, Life 101. But for 2,000 years, it's been Christianity 101. "Understand failure. Find the path to success."

Here's the mess I'm in. How did I get here? Let's get outta here. Christianity 101. What did I say earlier about two steps to perfection?
1. Know you're not. 2. Work hard to fix what's not.

Racism is our mess for now. We're not perfect. We need to "understand failure." We need to know how we got into this mess. And then "find the path forward."

For us, that's Christ. Christ's purpose is to take our imperfection and create perfection; to take our failure and put us on the path to success; to take our sin and redeem it into love; to take our mess and clean it up.

When planning for today, I kept thinking of two old hymns. I wish we could sing them. They'd be the perfect ending. One proclaims,

*"My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus's blood and righteousness.
On Christ the solid rock I stand
all other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand."*

Plain and simple. When it comes to racism, where is the "solid rock"? Where is the "sinking sand"? And above all, where would Jesus stand? And would we stand with him?

The other hymn offers us an out, an escape, before pulling us back to reality. It's about heaven, that "pie-in-the-sky by and by," that will be good, and heaven on earth.

The first verse begins:

*I'm pressing on the upward way
New heights I'm gaining every day
Still praying as I'm onward bound
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground*

And then the chorus:

*Lord lift me up and let me stand
Buy faith, on Heaven's tableland
A higher plane than I have found
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

You hear that desire for heaven, heaven's tableland, with our feet planted on "higher ground," where the view is great, and all is good.

But then the song returns to us, now, here:

*I want to scale the utmost height
and catch a gleam of glory bright
But still I'll pray 'till heaven I've found
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.*

We need to be on "higher ground," here, now, us.

When it comes to facing racism, we need to plant our feet on higher ground. The level of debate in this country needs to be planted on higher ground. Idle talk, locker-room conversation, unthinking words need to plant our feet on higher ground.

Boardroom decisions, hiring practice, Facebook posts need to plant their feet on higher ground.

Reactions, responses, and defenses need to plant their feet on higher ground.

What we're used to, what we settle for, what we allow need to be planted on higher ground. Our political priorities, social engagements, Church life need to plant our feet on higher ground.

*"On Christ the solid rock I stand
all other ground is sinking sand . . .
So still I'll pray, till heaven I've found
Lord, plant our feet on higher ground."*