

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: September 8, 2013  
Sermon Title: CHURCH!  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe and Rev. Alida Ward  
Scripture: Church Scriptures Litany (*below*)

## The Church Scriptures Litany, read responsively:

Leader: We are the Bride of Christ (*Revelation 19:3; 2 Corinthians 11:2*)  
**People: a chosen people** (*1 Peter 2:9*)  
Leader: The people of God (*1 Peter 2:10*)  
**People: The apple of God's eye** (*Zechariah 2:8*)  
Leader: fellow citizens and members of God's household (*Ephesians 2:19*)  
**People: A crown of splendor in the Lord's hand** (*Isaiah 62:3*)  
Leader: a royal diadem (*Isaiah 62:3*)  
**People: a holy nation** (*1 Peter 2:9*)  
Leader: we are heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ (*Romans 8:17*)  
**People: the body of Christ** (*Ephesians 5:30*)  
**Together: a royal priesthood** (*1 Peter 2:5*)  
**living stones** (*1 Peter 2:5*)  
**a holy temple** (*Ephesians 2:21*)  
**children of the light** (*Ephesians 5:8*)  
**the children of God** (*1 John 3:1*).  
**we are justified ... saved ... redeemed ... wanted ...**  
**called ... loved.**  
**We are the Church!**

## CHURCH 1 – David speaking:

O.K., Here we are. Second Sunday in September, the Sunday after Labor Day weekend, the summer is over, and church is back in full swing. The Deacons are cooking up a barbecue for everybody. Lots of people are here, our whole church ministry is up and running. There's excitement all around! Why? What's the big deal?

One of the "back stories" to Rev. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the great sermon from "The March on Washington" 50 years ago, is that Dr. King was preaching from a prepared text, something he'd

been working on for days, weeks; every word carefully crafted, just so, to make it a great day.

That's what preachers do. We don't want to stumble, mumble, or fumble, so we craft a sermon. We work it word by word, point by point, to somehow bring God's truth to light. So Dr. King is standing up there in front of the monument, carefully preaching the text of the most important sermon of his life, when Mahalia Jackson, the legendary opera singer, starts stage-whispering to Dr. King, "Tell them about the dream, Martin, tell them about the dream."

And so Dr. King set aside his carefully prepared text. He put away all those pages and started to "wing it." Recalling that moment, another man up on the stage remembers saying to himself, "NOW we are going to have CHURCH!"

I'm writing a new book. You'll be hearing that phrase for the next three years, I'm sure. It'll be my excuse for everything. Anyway, I'm writing this new book about CHURCH. In fact, that's the title. *Church*. Just *Church*. And the idea I'm going for is exactly what they said about Dr. King when he began to preach about "the dream." He said, "Now we are going to have Church!" He meant something special, something extraordinary, something elevated. In other words, there's church ... and there's CHURCH. There's church as edifice, building, palace, or church as ritual, liturgy, 55 minutes on a Sunday morning, in and out, Mass, Communion, maybe a song or two. And then there's CHURCH, when something special happens. It takes off. You can't always plan for it. You can't always explain it or define it. But something works. People will even say, "Now, THAT was church!"

Art McCain has a favorite phrase he quotes. He says, "We are all born with a God-shaped hole" that we need to fill. And some Sundays, we actually do fill that hole.

That's our sermon theme for today, broken up into five little pieces: CHURCH. What it is. Why we're here. How to be ... Church!

You come to church. Not every Sunday, but often enough. You're here today. It means something to you. You come with some hope, some expectation. You come. You bring the kids to Sunday School. You drop the kids at Youth Group. You get involved. You help out. You join Bible Study or the choir. You serve somehow. You have "Church" in your life. And on some level, it seems right. It feels good.

## **CHURCH 2 – Alida:**

Those scriptures that we read with Cindy just a minute ago, those are amazing scriptures. As someone whose life pretty much IS the church, there's part of me that is so inspired, motivated, exhilarated by passages like that, "the church is the apple of God's eye" – it's like, wow, I definitely picked the right job. But I have to say, there's a huge part of me that's completely intimidated by those passages. I mean – how on earth do we possibly live UP to all that? "Apple of God's eye?" A holy nation, a royal priesthood, the body of Christ, the people of God, the children of Light. Wow. It's a bit much.

I was thinking, it's okay to walk around town wearing a Yankees hat, or an American Flag bandana – I picked up one on the Appalachia trip this year – or your college sweatshirt – I got a bunch of those, and wearing all of those is okay, declaring your allegiances. But would anyone here really be comfortable going to the gym or school or work tomorrow with a t-shirt or a tattoo or bumper sticker that said "Hey, just so you know, I'm one of the Children of Light" "I'm God's Holy Temple" "Bride of Christ – right here" I mean, there are plenty of Christians who walk around with t-shirts and stuff that say how great GOD is, but it's another thing to let the world know how great YOU're supposed to be. It's a little awkward. It's like wearing a t-shirt that says "Ask me my IQ" or "Tell me how great I am."

Okay. So maybe you wouldn't ever advertise yourself as being amazing. But at the same time – there is something pretty cool about discovering how great you are in someone else's eyes. Our daughter Brigitta plays field hockey at her college, Bryn Mawr. And we watch every game. If we can't be there in person, they've got streaming video, and we peer at the computer screen for every minute. And after each game, we tell her – always – how amazing she was, what great pass she made in the second half, how much faster she looks than last year, how lucky the team is to have her. Et cetera.

Now, much to her relief, we don't call up her coach and say "OMG, how great is Brigitta!" "Hope you're noticing how truly awesome my daughter is!" And obviously when we're there and chatting with her teammates, we don't say "hey, how lucky are you to be playing with Brigitta?" But, we like Brigitta to know that we think she's pretty darn good. And we've been doing this since 7th grade, 10 years now, pumping her up, lifting her expectations of herself, raising her sights, doing our best to put her in a position to believe, to know, that she is better than she thought possible.

So, really, that's what those Bible passages do for us, the Church of Christ. We may think we're just a bunch of jokers sitting around in an old wooden church, showing up when we can, tossing some money in the plate, singing the hymns off-key – I speak only for myself here ... And the world may think we're a little quaint, people who actually go to church, stuck in some kind of timewarp of old traditions.

But no – but no. God is telling us that we are the Apple of God's Eye. We are God's royal crown. We are incredibly important in God's eyes.

Just like David and me bombarding our daughter with affirmation, God is in our face saying "you are amazing", and you know, little by little we start to believe it, we start raising our expectations of ourselves, we start raising our sights, we start playing to our potential, the potential God always knew was there. We are .... CHURCH.

### **CHURCH 3 – Alida:**

Sometimes, though, sometimes – the church really is a BUILDING. Yes, we broaden the definition, and we really do believe that we can have church, true church, anywhere. On our Appalachia trip, the first Sunday of the trip, I get everybody together out in the middle of the quad at Roanoke College, where we stay, on the grass in front of the dorms, and we have church, we definitely have Church. And that entire week, every morning and night when we gather for devotions and prayers, we're in school cafeterias, or out in the parking lot by our vans, and we are definitely having church. On our mission trips to India, we have church in tiny little buildings, huts, fields. And I know Jesus meant it when he said, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there is Church!"

But that said, that said, sometimes Church really is a building. Like this old place. This building is hardly a place of modern conveniences – the last gas station you stopped in probably had bigger bathrooms than we've got out front ... unlike in many modern churches, I can't push a button and have a projector screen drop from the ceiling, and let's face it, your most uncomfortable chair at home is probably more comfortable than the pew you're sitting in right now. But – we love this old church.

We've done weddings and funerals here for people who worship somewhere else, but who need to be someplace like this when it really matters – we've done two funerals for people who worship in a local school on Sundays, we have a wedding coming up for a family that worships at the Fairfield Theatre

Company, and we do weddings and funerals for families with no church. Because in that moment, in that special, holy moment, they want a building. A church building, a place with pews, and an altar, and a pulpit, and a cross, and a steeple up above. And that's us. We're not modern, or trendy, or even particularly easy to find. But at the right time, we are a touchstone. This feels like CHURCH. And we understand why there are times when people need to be HERE. We get that.

There are a bunch of passages in the Book of Psalms, in the Bible, that seem to get that. In fact, they kind of sound like they were written for us—even though they were written almost three thousand years ago:

"How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord – it's better to have one day in your house than a thousand elsewhere."

"I love the house where you live, O God."

"I was glad when they said to me, let us go up to the house of the Lord."

"One thing I ask, and this is what I seek: that I may live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

Yeah.

Sometimes a church building really is **church**.

#### **CHURCH 4 – *David*:**

Two contrasting images. We, you and me, this church, we are "the Bride of Christ" AND the "lively stones." For ALL of us, being "lively stones" seems a contradiction. How can we be both lively AND a stone? And for some of us, we can barely imagine what it means to be a bride. But let's try.

A bride! In our church people really take weddings seriously. Couples call us a year, year and a half, two years in advance! They meet with us, talk with us, listen to us, share with us on a deep level. And especially for the bride, and that's a fact, a universal fact, especially for the bride, it is really, really big. For a bride, it's a time of planning, celebration, honor, friendship. Incredible focus.

Think about it. If we are the bride of Christ, then Christ is the groom. And if you know anything about weddings, you know the groom is #2, not #1. It's all for the bride. That's a pretty amazing statement, then, isn't it, that we, this little church, your church, we are the "bride of Christ."

And "lively stones"? I love that paradox, two words that can't go together, yet they do! As a church we are to be everything a stone is: sturdy, solid, something to build with, strong, reliable. Yet, we are to be lively! Rock solid and inert! Our goal is to be alive. And if you believe in Christ as "lively stones," you are in the right place, because the one thing we've got going for us is LIFE.

Let me explain this paradox with one little example. Our Memorial Garden across the street ... behind the barn is our church's Memorial Garden, full of stones, the stones full of ashes and memories of loved ones who have died. And yet everything about the Memorial Garden breathes life. The garden itself is a field of life, even wildlife, and trees and shrubs and activities. Kids playing, Youth Group meetings. We've had weddings out there, and last week was a baptism party.

Yes, in our church, even our stones are lively, and that's nothing compared to the rest of Church at Greenfield Hill.

### **CHURCH 5 – David (*spoken after our Church School children had processed into church*)**

Now, THIS is church! A gigantic parade of children with 400 people singing "Jesus Loves Me," the aroma of hamburgers and hotdogs on the grill, an old-fashioned ice cream truck, and new-fangled blow-up bouncy game waiting for us. Yes! This is CHURCH!

### **and Alida:**

There's this wonderful story in the Bible about the moment when they were dedicating the Temple in Jerusalem –you have to understand, YEARS of planning went into building this temple, it was huge, spectacular, a gazillion dollars worth of marble and gold and jewels and stuff. And when it was finished, it was mind-blowingly gorgeous one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Taj Mahal of faith. So of course they wanted to have a spectacular ceremony to dedicate the temple, and they planned it all out with an impressive list of dignitaries and VIP's, and it was all going to be very stately and impressive. That was the plan.

But what happened in the moment was that there was so much energy and enthusiasm from the people, so much excitement, that the whole dignified and stately thing fell apart. Joy and Pride and Faith all mixed together to create...well, to create CHURCH. Just like today.

THIS is church at Greenfield Hill. Yeah!