

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 13, 2015
Sermon Title: Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and
Joe Biden Are *All* Right (well, kinda!)
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe and Rev. Alida Ward

The Psalms declare:

"This is the DAY the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."
(Psalm 118)

"How Lovely is your dwelling place, O, God, my soul yearns for church, my
heart cries out for the Living God!
(Psalm 84)

"Come, let us sing for joy to God. Let's shout aloud to the Rock of our
Salvation. Let us come before God with Thanksgiving.
(Psalm 95)

"Come, let us bow down in worship, worship the Lord with gladness, know
that the Lord is God and we are his people." "For God is good, and his love
endures forever!"
(Psalm 100)

Good morning! We've had a great summer at our church, and now we break
out our new church year. To do it right we have a different sort of service
today to let you know what we stand for and hear our best hopes for the
year ahead. Look at the front page of our sort-of special-edition bulletin.
That's us, your staff, your ministers, and under each name is our personal
goal for this year's ministry.

For Alida, to "welcome all, embrace all."

For Sandra, to lead us in "singing joyously."

For Rachel, to guide us in "becoming," fully becoming what God intends for
you and me.

For Roni, to help all of us "believe with heart and soul."

For Marcia, after celebrating her 25th year here as our Director of Christian
Education, she will use her 26th year to move us toward "faith in action."

For Jamilah, to embrace "holistically healing faith."

And for me? To “love deeper,” to take this amazing gift of God, love itself, and take it deeper, wider, fuller, more amazing than ever before. Those are *bold* statements, and we can be that bold only because we believe in you. With you as our church, we can do all that.

So yes, this *is* a “good morning.”

The Apostles’ Creed

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

What We Believe (David), or ‘Donald Trump Is Right!’

Here’s how the Bible describes itself: All Scripture is profitable, *profitable*, helpful, useful for teaching, rebuking, connecting, and training, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

I’m a news junkie and a politics junkie. So, Labor Day is over, there’s a presidential election upcoming. There are 7 million candidates running for president. In fact, it’s been full speed all summer. It’s already crazy, and I love it! So I thought with our Sunday mini-sermons today, I’d use two ideas stolen from Donald Trump and Ben Carson to get us thinking, or at least to get your attention!

Our worship service is divided up into four mini-parts: What We *Believe*, What We *Have*, What We *Need*, and What We *Celebrate*.

For this part, "What We Believe," I surprised a lot of you by starting with "The Apostles' Creed." Something we never recite in our church. The Apostles' Creed is the ancient summary of Christian belief. Lots of churches say it every Sunday. But the Congregational Church is part of what's called a "non-creedal" church. That doesn't mean we don't believe anything. It means we don't put words in your mouth and force you to a unity of belief. Churches like ours are more inclined to have you express yourself, to speak up for yourself, to state your own beliefs. To oversimplify, we say, "Here's the Bible. Read it. Work out what you believe, and let's discuss it."

Or, to quote Donald Trump, "Nothing beats the Bible, the Bible's my favorite book. I love the Bible. It's better than my own book."

Well, O.K. then, that's a good place to begin when it comes to what we believe. We start with the Bible. "The Donald" says it's a great book, his favorite book, the best book. And it just so happens the Bible is front and center at our church. In our preaching, in our teaching, in our counseling, in our youth work, we do look to the Bible for guidance.

Now, I have to admit, there are parts we skip over. The part where it says to kill your son if he's disobedient, we skip that. "Women, keep silent in the church!" St. Paul wrote. (I won't even touch that one.) And, we don't sacrifice animals on the altar. And we gave up being kosher ages ago. And, at least in our church, we haven't stoned anyone since—I think it was last February. But the other stuff we find compelling. Read the prophets. Read Jesus, read Jesus some more. Read the Bible's greatest stories and parables: Ruth, Esther, the Burning Bush, the Good Samaritan. Try living the Ten Commandments or just the two great Commandments or the Beatitudes. Or just one of the Beatitudes!

That's good stuff, powerful stuff, important stuff. And it's front and center here all year long. Do you know we have two Bible studies every week, on Thursday mornings and Thursday nights? Do you know we send out a one-page e-mail Bible Study every week to 300 people? Do you know that almost every hour of every day we turn to the Bible for something: advice, inspiration, priorities, ideas?

So come on, let's help Donald Trump. Let's keep the Bible No. 1! Dig into it. Read it. Wrestle with it. Talk with us about it. Take it off the shelf, dust it off, open it up. Be amazed. "All Scripture is profitable."

We saved our first hymn till now, a little bit later in the service than usual; we wanted to build up to it! Our first hymn expresses the theme of our church life this year: everything we do, we do with joy. It's how we plan to

do our work, to raise our funds, to live each day. A big, bold, brassy, optimistic hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee."

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,
Op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!*

*All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heav'n reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flow'ry meadow, flashing sea,
Singing bird and flowing fountain
Call us to rejoice in Thee.*

*Thou art giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blest,
Wellspring of the joy of living,
Ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother,
All who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other,
Lift us to the joy divine.*

*Mortals, join the happy chorus,
Which the morning stars began;
Father love is reigning o'er us,
Brother love binds man to man.
Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife,
Joyful music leads us Sunward
In the triumph song of life.*

What We Have (Alida), or Joe Biden Is Right!

David's already talked about what we believe here at Greenfield Hill:
the way we honor each person's journey of faith by rooting our beliefs not so
much in a stated creed
but in a story, the story of love that the pages of the Bible reveal to us.

Now David loves coming up with sermon titles that catch our attention --
he always says his favorite word in the English language is provocative --
and believe you me, when I saw that he was leading off this service with
'Donald Trump is right,' I did the same double-take that all of you did.
Didn't know where we were headed today.

Well, I'm going to keep the theme going, and I'm going to jump to the other
side of the aisle.

My little message might well be titled "Joe Biden is right."

Here's why.

On Thursday evening, I was up late reading all the wonderful letters and
cards you've sent me to give Marcia.

On the TV in the background, Joe Biden was sitting down for an interview
with Stephen Colbert.

I wasn't paying attention right away, but then, all of a sudden I was.

The next day, everyone was talking about it,
the depth of emotion in the conversation,
the fact that the two men talked together in raw and open way about grief,
and the losses each had known in life.

And commentators spent all Friday and yesterday wondering what it all
meant for the election -- whether Biden was in or out.

But few commented on what to me was the Gospel heart of that
conversation:

when Colbert asked Biden how his faith had helped him.

And Biden said "it's just an enormous source of solace.

I go to mass. I pray. I find it to be incredibly comforting."

An enormous source of solace.

An incredible comfort.

It doesn't matter that he's Catholic,

and we're sitting here in a quintessential old Protestant church.

What he said is what is true for all of us:

to gather together in church and to pray, is our solace, it is our comfort.

That's what we find here, that's what we have here:
in prayer is our solace, our comfort, our strength.
We pray: together in these pews, we pray.
We pray for our own selves, for what we need and what we struggle with.
And we pray for each other.
We know that sitting near us is one who lost his mother, and we pray
strength.
We know that sitting back behind us is someone facing surgery, and we pray
courage.
We pray, together we pray, we pray that solace, that comfort.

And it keeps going beyond this hour together,
our prayer chain of church folk keep those prayers going (and they're always
glad to have more people join that chain).
Or on Thursday nights, when our teens hold hands in a prayer circle that fills
the Barn,
and they speak aloud the names of those who need love and comfort.
And often, often, early in the morning or late late at night,
people slip quietly into this Sanctuary,
sit in these pews, alone with God, and deep, deep in prayer.

We pray our spirits into healing even as we pray healing for others;
we pray our hearts into hoping even as we pray hope for the ones we love;
we pray our way into peace even as we pray peace for those who struggle.

We are known for being a doing church.
And that we are. We serve, we work, we build, we go and go and go.
But we can only do what we have strength to do,
and our strength comes from what we have here, in these pews,
in this church, in this family of faith:
What we have is the incredible comfort of shared prayer,
the enormous solace found in talking to our God.

So let's come together now in prayer ... (*pastoral prayer here*)

What We Need – or, *Ben Carson is Right!* (David)

Maybe you've already read our special edition Deacons' Picnic Sunday
bulletin/newsletter. On page 2 is my not-so-subtle reminder about "giving"
at Greenfield Hill Church. Regarding your church offering, the Bible has two
classic teachings. In the Old Testament, it says, "Bring your tithe, your one-
tenth of everything, into the storehouse." (Malachi 3:10) And in the New
Testament, we read, "The Lord loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7)

So, "What do we give?" Well, to be blunt: everything, a lot, in all kinds of ways. It's autumn, so yes, you can count on it. Our church leaders will be wrapping up the 2015 finances, trying to break even; they'll be making a budget for 2016 and trying to get each of us to give our best. That's part of our giving.

This summer, people brought in piles of stuff for our soldiers, for our care packages to Afghanistan and Iraq. A little taste of home, a sort of partner to our "Field of Flags," another way to show that we remember. That's part of our giving.

Notice our five empty chairs up here in the choir loft. In the past year, we've lost five treasured, beloved members of our choir—moved away, moved on, retired. Five people who gave, yes, gave years, even decades, Sunday after Sunday, to lift our souls with music. I think it was last winter or the winter before, we had one of our delightful blizzards. Alida and I shoveled out the walkways. It was impossible to drive, but just about the whole choir made it to church! That's another way of giving.

In the last two years, we've lost almost 50 active church members. Job transfers, new jobs, retirements; folks off to Chicago, Florida, Texas, Massachusetts, California. These are people who were in our pews every week, their kids were always in Sunday School, they served on boards and committees, worked hard for Dogwood, gave generously. They gave generously in a hundred ways. Now they're gone.

When we lived in Georgia, my son played high school baseball, where baseball was *king*. His high school baseball field was a 3,000-seat, all-wood stadium, where Ty Cobb had once played. They had T-shirts one year that declared, "We're not rebuilding . . . we're recharging!"

That's our declaration at Greenfield Hill Church. The challenges of our world, our town, our economy are many. We have empty spots in our choir loft, empty spots in the pews. There's talk about GE's moving and real estate not moving, and how to raise enough money to be a great church. But we're not worried. We're not rebuilding, we're recharging!

Which has to do with Ben Carson, how? Well, at the first Republican Candidates' debate, one of the questions, of course, was about taxes: tax policy, tax reform. Dr. Ben Carson's response was to get back to the Bible. "Simplify it," Carson said, "a tithe, it's in the Bible, it'll work." He's right; a "tithe" is in the Bible, and it would work, at least in church. A tithe is 10 percent, and in the early days of our Bible, in ancient Israel, people gave a

tithe of everything to God. If they were shepherds, 10 percent of their sheep, or wool, went to their church; if they were farmers, 10 percent of their corn or olives or fruit trees; if they were in business, 10 percent of their earnings. The tithe had two purposes. First, it was a “thank you” to God. Second, it funded the religious life of the people.

Some of us grew up in churches where tithing was the norm. It’s what people did, Nowadays most Americans, even religious Americans, have gotten away from tithing—too old-fashioned, too legalistic. But Dr. Carson is right. It is Biblical. It is simple. It works.

I’m guessing you like our church, or you wouldn’t be here today. And if you’re new here today, maybe you’ve heard nice things about our church. And this really *is* a nice church, full of good people doing great things, here around town and halfway around the world. This is a good, believing, caring, active, doing, making-a-difference church. The mind boggles—maybe God’s mind wouldn’t boggle at what our church would be like if each of us moved closer to tithing. Maybe Ben Carson is right!

And don’t forget, whether you’re at 10 percent or on the way to 10 percent or at 1 percent trying to get to 1½ percent, the New Testament has a bigger priority: “The Lord loves a cheerful giver.” Whatever you do, whatever you give, however you help, however you contribute, do it cheerfully!

That’s one of the reasons we started church today with Beethoven’s “Hymn of Joy.” “Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,” and that’s why we’ll close our worship by singing that “joyful” hymn one more time, hoping to impress that joy upon every moment of our church life.

What We Celebrate (Alida): our Marcia

In an hour’s time,
we’re going to be celebrating Marcia Carothers’ twenty-five years as our
Director of Christian Education.
We’re going to bring all the kids into the church,
we’ve got five speakers,
and it’s going to be joyous and probably incredibly chaotic.

I’m going to give you a sneak peek preview of what’s going to be said in
those moments –
and you get to hear it in much more calm and sedate surroundings.

If you run into Marcia after this service, then ‘shhhh’ – you can’t tell her
what I’m about to share with you.

We're going to be presenting her with a big beautiful album full of letters and cards that the people of this church have given me to give to her ... And if there's one theme in those cards that's expressed over and over, it's the theme of welcome.

"It was my first Sunday here," says one letter, "and it was Marcia who welcomed me in."

"Our kids were really nervous coming to Church School" says another, "but Marcia made them feel so welcome."

"How does she remember everyone's names?" said yet another, "It's awesome, it makes everyone feel like they belong, like they're welcome."

None of that's by accident.

Marcia makes people feel welcome, because Marcia's own personal theology, the north star by which Marcia guides all her actions, is the theology of welcome.

The belief that everyone should be made to feel at home because everyone is a child of God.

The belief, the Christ-centered belief, that no one is outside the circle; that everyone should be drawn in, just as Christ himself drew all people in.

The core conviction that reminds us: God so loved the world ... and therefore we must ourselves so love.

That's Marcia theology, the theology of what she calls 'extravagant welcome.'

'Extravagant welcome.'

So what do we celebrate today?

Not just 25 years of a pretty wonderful staff person.

Not just 25 years of continuity, the longevity of our Church School directory.

What we celebrate is that spirit of welcome that permeates this church because Marcia has worked so hard to make it central.

What we celebrate is the amazing way in which God works through us to draw all people close to God.

What we celebrate is the welcome that you and I experience in one another and in the open arms of God.

We will celebrate Marcia today, yes.

But we also celebrate the spirit of this church family,

which rejoices in each child,

delights in each teen,

opens wide the door for the stranger,

and embraces each one here in love.

We celebrate that God has welcomed us into God's own heart;

and we pledge ourselves always to the joyful work of extravagant welcome.