

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 13, 2011  
Sermon Title: What We Do  
Scripture: Romans 12:3-13  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe and Rev. Alida Ward

## **Romans 12:3-13**

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

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David Rowe:

This is not a sermon pushing my new book, but the founder of Habitat for Humanity did have a favorite poem that I absolutely loved, so today, when we are thinking about what church is worth, it's a terrific definition of church. The poem is by Edwin Markham, called "Outwitted."

*He drew a circle that shut me out —  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!*

That's us. We spend 365 days a year trying to redraw the circle so that more people feel that love of God. When we ask for your church pledge, you may think we are looking for money to pay for the heat, light, insurance, salaries, snow removal, and Sunday School curriculum. But really it's for erasers and pencils, as we keep redrawing the circle, *because Love and we have the wit to win: we redraw the circle that takes folks in.*

It's not easy preaching the annual "please give to our church" sermon because it feels pretty close to "singing for my supper"! We run a fairly barebones operation for a church of our size and activity. So most of what you give keeps us open and running and keeps us employed.

It seems somewhat plaintive and desperate to say, "Please fill out your pledge card." I remember once when I was a pastor in New York City, I was asked to preach at a friend's church on "Pastor Appreciation Sunday." In his church, in their tradition, the pastor got paid once a year from a big offering taken right after the guest preacher preached! In that case, I was singing for someone else's supper!

Another problem with preaching this annual "please give to your church" sermon is a temptation to tell you stories of how important this ministry is. But those stories might sound as though I was breaking confidentiality, and that's not cool. What I can do is tell you stories from my other churches that give a glimpse of church life.

Truth is, church life doesn't change much from church to church. People are the same all over, life's problems and joys are similar. I remember telling someone that the difference between one church I pastored and another was that in the one, whenever I quoted Shakespeare, someone would correct me. But at the other one, I had to tell them who Shakespeare was! But they both did like Shakespeare. Come to think of it, church life resembles Shakespeare — comedy, tragedy, and human drama all mixed together.

I remember one day a young lady came to my church office to inquire about her baby's baptism and about getting involved in helping out. She was nervous and young, but earnest, and very happy when I said, "Of course we'd love to have you in our church and baptize your baby." So I took down the information, mother's name, father's name ("He's not around," she said), and baby's name. Lo and behold, the baby turned out to be a famous pop singer's love child! I didn't know this at the time she got involved in the church. She was very active and a terrific mother. And a few years later it all went to court. I had to testify. It was proven to be true, and the case made the papers!

My church was in a very proper, very elegant, very classy neighborhood — a sort of urban Greenfield Hill. So it was quite an event when the *New York Post* headlined "Queens Sunday School Teacher Sues Pop Star for Child Support." She

was indeed a Sunday School teacher who was embraced and welcomed and put to work in a church that loved her and her daughter. We just opened the circle and took them in, tried to live the "Amazing Grace" we love to sing.

Youth ministry is definitely the hallmark of a healthy church, but it's always risky, fun, adventurous. At one church a dear lady left \$100,000 to the church. She was a lifelong Sunday School teacher, loved kids and youth, supported them every way she could. Well, the church held a special meeting to decide what to do with the \$100,000. A bunch of teenagers showed up and requested that one-third be used for kids and youth and Sunday school. Some penny-pinchers growled, but most were proud. That's what happens when you empower young people. They begin to take church seriously, faith seriously, values and virtues seriously, others seriously.

I got a phone call last summer from a man who had been in my youth group 30 years ago. He told me some folks were writing a screenplay for a movie to be called "Youth Group," based on, yes, my youth group. God help us!

I was at that church for seven years. That would be seven times 52 Sundays equals 364 weeks of youth groups, and every single one was a challenge. One kid learned to inject oranges with vodka, so she'd go to school and eat healthy all morning long and mysteriously be drunk by noon. One night after youth group, I found six-packs of beer in the youth group room, so I called my usual suspects together, and it's possible that I lost my temper. Well, let my "would-be Hollywood script writer" describe his memories of that!

"Rev." (they always called me "Rev."), "Rev., remember that night you found all the beer cans and you started throwing them at us, hard, and we had to run out of your office? You probably thought we were running away from you, but we were actually running fast so we could find all the other beer we'd stashed around the church before you did!"

And yet, out of that group emerged moms and dads, teachers and college professors, pastors and scientists, writers and philanthropists, entrepreneurs and artists.

A month ago I received this e-mail from one of those kids:

*Rev. Rowe:*

*The teen group at Church in the Gardens was a refuge, a safe place with great fellowship and terrific leaders. You welcomed all, regardless of whether we were church members or not. You understood us as teens, and it meant a lot to me. I am a Christian now, serving in the men's ministry at my church, and I am working with the pastors on setting up workshops for fathers and sons. I saw*

*firsthand the power of the church family in your group, and now, along with my sons, I am trying to do the Lord's work by being salt and light for others. It seems like yesterday. Thanks so much for all you did for us. God bless.*

You know, some people mock churches that emphasize love. They say it's soft and easy and liberal. Well first of all, love is hard. Second it's in the Bible. Third it works.

This is Veterans Day weekend. I started in ministry at the height of the Vietnam War, and most of my years with you we've been at war. Through it all, in each church we have walked that narrow space between worshipping "the Prince of Peace" and singing "Onward Christian Soldiers."

In my first church, I had to do a lot of draft counseling. In my next church, on Maundy Thursday, emulating Jesus, we washed the feet of an 18-year-old boy in our church who had dropped out of school to join the army. In another church, we lined the streets of our small town as our local soldiers went off to fight the first Persian Gulf War. In another church, we hosted a huge luncheon debate featuring a Vietnam veteran and a Vietnam protestor. And here at our church, we have the "Field of Flags" deepening our awareness, our sorrow, our pride, and our love. Year after year, we make the circle of love larger.

I'll close with a word about weddings. Weddings are an extraordinary ministry: filled with love, packed with tension. Part joy, part stress, a whole lot of history looking over their shoulders, and a great big future lying ahead — if they can survive the wedding.

I've had to station guards at the church doors to keep out ex-flames, ex-spouses, ex in-laws, even future in-laws! Siblings and bridesmaids staged boycotts at the exact moment the processional was about to begin. I've had the ridiculous, the sublime, and the scary. I had to talk one guy into calling off his wedding at the rehearsal because he was an abusive boyfriend marrying a Mafia guy's daughter. I told him he was going to end up in the East River with cement shoes if he didn't walk away now. I had one bride show up four hours late and one groom not show up at all at the old Tavern on the Green. He missed a great party.

I did one wedding after both sets of parents agreed not to kill their children. That was in India. I did another wedding in Africa translated into four languages from my English. The wedding was preceded by two days of negotiation: how much cloth, food, and beer, and how many animals the bride's family was to receive. I also married a pro football player, the "strong safety" for the New York Jets. The church was full of athletes, teammates, sports writers, broadcasters.

As with every wedding, I met with the couple ahead of time, got to know them, prepared them for marriage. So I asked, "What you do for a living?" "I'm a strong safety," he says. "What's a strong safety do?" "I hang out in the background waiting for trouble to come my way, then I stop it."

I often get asked what I do for a living. It's usually preceded by the tired joke, "I know you work only one day a week ... ha-ha-ha-ha, chuckle chuckle, chuckle." The reality is my New York Jets strong safety provided a nice bookend for this sermon.

Mostly, we hang out in the background waiting for trouble to come, and then we tackle it. And mostly the way we tackle it is just the way Edwin Markham said: we open up the circle and bring the trouble inside for God's loving touch.

That's what we use your church pledge for.