

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 4, 2011  
Sermon Title: Between Earthquake and Hurricane  
Scripture: Acts 17:16-23  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Acts 17:16-23

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.*

*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*

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Once every year or so I preach a sermon called "This and That," a sort of collection of thoughts, ideas, half-baked sermons, not necessarily connected — just small slices of something bouncing around my head, begging to come out. Labor Day Sunday seems like a good time to do it.

Such a disjointed sermon simply mirrors the disjointed life of being a pastor. Our whole lives are "this and that." It is the very disjointedness that is our connection.

It's part of what attracted me to ministry in the first place, when I first heard God's call to become a pastor. I watched my father being a pastor all my life, and it was great! Because you could never tell what was my father's work and what wasn't ... where ministry stopped and some other activity began.

My father would preach, and he was a great preacher. I think I am moved to say that today because last week in Brooklyn, he says, he preached his last sermon. He began preaching 77 years ago when he was 12, and now he's hanging up ... oh, I don't know, whatever preachers hang up!

Anyway, he'd preach, he'd hang out with the local rabbi and swap ideas, and they'd play handball in the park; then he'd march with Martin Luther King, Jr., he'd teach confirmation class, go visit folks in the hospital, do a funeral, then, because there was no Little League in our area, he started a Little League; and he organized his Rotary club to feed the poor; he met with priests and nuns when that still wasn't done; and when a cross was burned on the neighbor's lawn, my dad was the first one there. And there were weddings, baptisms, and basketball leagues and counseling.

I think maybe the term "what have you" was designed to describe pastoral ministry. So when I felt God calling me into ministry, I was actually pretty pleased. It is an amazing life. I'm guessing we pattern ourselves after Jesus and St. Paul; they had an amazing, varied, peripatetic life (I've always wanted to use the word "peripatetic" in a sermon). I think it just means "walking around," "wandering." Which, believe it or not, is a lot of what we do.

You'll remember that Alida led 198 people to ASP in early summer. And what did she do? She went from county to county, work site to work site, group to group, and invariably from person to person. She got around. Peripatetic, laughing here, encouraging there, helping a bit, working, building, advising, listening, lifting, cajoling.

Actually, sort of a typical day in the life of Jesus. I'm not saying that we're like Jesus except I am saying that we're supposed to *be* like Jesus. That's why we talk about "Christlikeness" in our church all the time. "Christlikeness," being as much like Christ as possible. We and you and all of us, "Christlike." Except Alida and I get paid! To be "Christlike." I've often said that the only difference between you and us is that we get paid to be Christians and you don't. But the level of performance, the level of expectation is the same. You're expected to be a Christlike baker or broker, a Christlike financial analyst, a Christlike house builder, a Christlike

homemaker, a Christlike commuter or teacher or community volunteer or politician or artist. Or a Christlike kid, student, or athlete, parent or child.

Alida and I, same thing: we are supposed to be like Christ. So, like Christ, we keep on the move, we get around. A quick trip to Bridgeport Hospital to see a family with a brand-new baby; down to Norwalk Hospital to visit a friend after surgery; back to the office for whole bunch of "this and that," e-mails and administration and phone calls and visits and planning; in the late afternoon off to our local schools to see our young people in action: a lacrosse game, soccer, swimming, field hockey, a school play, school chorus. Back to church for meetings, premarital counseling, meeting with a family to plan a funeral. And sometimes, just thinking, plotting, planning, letting ideas percolate, thinking about Christmas in July, Easter in January. This and that. Here and there. All modeled after two pretty good mentors, Jesus and St. Paul.

When people talk about Paul's life, they summarize it as Paul's three missionary journeys, three ever-enlarging spheres of influence, three ever-expanding circles — all just a result of Paul's going here and then going there, starting churches, challenging assumptions, shaking things up; lecturing, hectoring, going to jail, escaping from jail. And writing, always writing. Half the New Testament is either written by Paul or about Paul.

What does this have to do with you? So far, all I've said is that I'm busy, I'm out and about all the time, which is why I'm never home when you call! Guess what! You're never home when *I* call! Because you're busy, you're out and about all the time, you're in the market place, you're on the road, you're in the classroom, you're on the playing field, you're at the doctor's, at the office, on the train, in the kitchen. You're dealing with authorities and officials, supporters and opponents. You're in good company out there with Jesus and St. Paul

So we need an "out-there" Christianity. That's why I chose the Scripture for today, an interesting little story of Paul's visiting what was even then historic, legendary, touristy ancient Athens. And Paul goes to the Areopagus, a sort of urban town square, an intellectual flea market, a lively place of social discourse and free exchange of ideas. A fun place.

As Paul starts to talk, people gather round, interested, intrigued, willing to listen, to be engaged, provoked, inspired. Right there, we see Paul at his best. Oh, he had his prickly side, he told women to shut up, told slaves to know their place, and gays to forget about it. But on this particular day, Paul was charming, welcoming, inviting, while still being true to his faith and still

being provocative, challenging, and interesting. He tells the folks, "I like your city. Cool place. Very religious, spiritual. I can feel it all around me. There are temples and altars and statues everywhere. Very tolerant, very inclusive, very thoughtful. It shows the spirit of openness and inquiry and yearning. I admire that yearning. You don't close the door on anything. You want to know more. Why, I even saw a temple dedicated to the 'unknown god.'"

"I like that!" Says St. Paul, "that's not 'my way or the highway,' that's more like 'my way and maybe there is this other way.'" So he told them about "the other way." He told them about Jesus. Notice, he wasn't in church, he wasn't at home. He was out and about. He was always out and about. Just like you and me.

My point is if we limit our actual public Christianity to Sunday worship ... well, think about it. This is just a rough guess, but I estimate half of you come to church every Sunday. That would be 52 hours a year of active Christianity. We'll add an hour or two for Christmas Eve, maybe Good Friday; we'll give you 55 hours per year. Maybe a quarter of our church comes to church every other week or so. The other quarter comes monthly. That's 26 hours per year for one group, 12 hours per year for the rest.

Listen to me carefully: I'm not complaining, whining, or blaming, I know your travel, your family activities; I know how crazy your lives are. Believe me, some Sundays I can barely make it to church myself! So if our active Christianity is limited to Sunday worship, that's pretty limited. And remember, I'm saying "active Christianity." Of course, I know you take your faith with you. Whether you're in Hong Kong or Paris or on the West Coast or Wall Street, your faith is there with you. Wherever we are, whatever we're doing, whatever we're facing, our faith is there with us. I know that. You know that. I'm talking about something more active, more public, more "out there."

It's been a heck of a couple of weeks, right? Earthquake on Tuesday. Hurricane on Sunday. A plague of locusts came in on Monday. Really! I found one on the front porch! The worst of religion has already been active. One clergyman blamed the D.C. earthquake on ... you guessed it: gays and the federal government's coddling of gays. And the hurricane: some higher-ups have assumed it is a message from God. Evidently, God is so inept, so incompetent, so stupid, that when he's angry at gays and government in D.C., he sends an earthquake that starts in Virginia, while the president is on Martha's Vineyard.

And this is the God who supposedly runs the universe, the God who is so awesome, the God we are supposed to worship and praise. But he can't even figure out a GPS or read a map!

Of course, I'm being sarcastic. But it is infuriating that it is so often the worst, the absolute worst of religious people who are so active publicly with their religion. The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 is coming up. It's also the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the worst of Muslims' living out their religion. It's the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of some prominent American clergy telling us that God stopped protecting America because of lesbians, feminists, and the ACLU. It's the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a Lutheran pastor's losing his job because he took part in an interfaith memorial service at Yankee Stadium. It's the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of blasphemy and heresy and stupidity and evil, all in the name of God. Those people are active in their religion, public, and out there. Indeed, it may be their very activity, their very loudness that makes us silent, or passive. We don't want to be like that.

Fair enough. It's not God's stupidity or people's arrogance that we want to take actively out into the world. It's God's love and our humility that's the activity we can take public.

Two weeks ago we closed worship with a popular hymn, "They'll Know We Are Christians." You may remember that I introduced the final hymn as "boring and awful and monotonous," despite the fact it was my pick. I took a lot of flack for that; it turns out to be a favorite hymn of a lot of people! And the reason is simple: the words are great, the words are what we want to believe, and what we want to do.

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord ...  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side ...  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand ...*

And the chorus repeats:

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
They will know we are Christians by our love.*

That's a good motto for us, as we begin a new church year tomorrow, as we prepare to face the memories of 9/11 next Sunday, as we get up every day wanting to make a difference — let the world know out there in the public arena, let them "know we are Christians by our love."