

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 29, 2012
Sermon Title: A Grumpy Pastor, a Grumpy Church
Scripture: From Jude and Titus
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Grumpy Scripture

"Certain men have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless ... dreamers who pollute their bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings ... they speak abusively ... they are blemishes at your love feasts ... they are clouds without rain, autumn trees without fruit, wild waves of the sea ... they are grumblers, faultfinders, boasters and flatterers ... scoffers and dividers (from Jude) ... rebellious people, empty talkers and deceivers ... ruining whole families by their teaching ... Cretans, liars, evil, lazy gluttons and corrupted ... they are detestable, disobedient and unfit." (from Titus 1).

Wow! That's some Scripture from Jude and Titus! Jude and Titus writing to some grumpy churches. How would you like to belong to those churches? A church with sneaky members, who "slipped in secretly, Godless dreamers and polluters, even slanderers of angels, for Pete's sake, blemishing Holy Communion, grumblers, whiners, deceitful, lying, lazy gluttons, detestable unfit Cretans"!

For the last few weeks, our church's Bible Studies have been exploring some of the lesser-known books of the Bible. We did Jude, and now we're finishing up Titus. Both were letters written by top leaders in the early Christian church, written to the people in other churches that were having a lot of trouble. A LOT of trouble.

How did that happen? Let me give you a quick history lesson. I tend to think that Christianity began on Easter. On Easter Sunday, the dead Jesus was suddenly alive. The dead, murdered, executed, killed Jesus was miraculously very much alive. Without that, the world would have no Christian religion. Jesus would have been a good guy remembered for his teaching and stories,

his simplicity, maybe even his death. All that might have turned into some kind of philosophy, and he would be remembered like some of the old Greeks, or even our own Ralph Waldo Emerson. But by Easter afternoon, the whole world of religion was about to change.

The carpenter from Galilee who was God's only son, who had volunteered to die on the cross to pay for our sins, and had done it ... all of a sudden, he was back, he was alive, he was a force to be reckoned with. Jesus stayed around long enough, physical enough, real enough to quite literally leave such an impression, such an impact, that nothing could turn his followers away. Not fear. Not persecution. Not death. Fifty days later, 50 days after that fateful Easter weekend comes Pentecost, where God jumpstarted the whole Christian movement with a great display of miracles and wonder.

What had been a tiny movement of maybe 100 believers was quickly 3,100 people loving one another, helping one another, filled with joy and faith and incredible hope about the future! Overnight, Christianity was a force to be reckoned with, and soon it was spread beyond Jerusalem, beyond Israel, beyond the Middle East. Down into Africa, up into Europe, Greece, and Rome and Turkey, off into India.

All over the place, little pockets of people who took the name of Christ upon themselves. They were Christians, little Christs, modeled after the Jesus of Nazareth, little gatherings of people, "Ecclesiae," the gatherings were called (ecclesia: an assembly, a church). Places of people who were going to change the world, save the world with an astounding message of God's love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son... [because] God is love. [Therefore] love God with all your heart and soul, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. And love your enemies." People believed that stuff. There was euphoria and idealism, a zeal, a passion, a divine sense of purpose and calling.

We can take lots of clichés, string them all together, and they'd be right! Clichés like the people's spirits soared, they were "all in," committed, dedicated, shoulder to the wheel, full speed ahead, in the zone, lock and load, raring' to go! We've all been there — some business venture, some family experience, some personal goal, some national endeavor, some point at which you were focused, inspired, victorious.

That was the early church. People were tired of religious baloney, stupid Caesars, petty kings, local corruption, grinding poverty, spiritual wilderness, nonsense rules and regulations and rituals. Then along comes Jesus, and he says, "*KISS*. K-I-S-S, Keep it simple, stupid! There is God, there is you, and there's your neighbor. Love one another. It is that simple!"

That was the early church. And yet within two generations churches were split apart by "godless polluters, deceitful liars and grumblers, lazy gluttons," who even managed to ruin Holy Communion! How did this happen? How did they go from euphoria to laziness, from changing the world to dividing families, from rejoicing in Christ to whining, from loving their neighbor to ripping off their neighbor? Truth is we don't know enough of the particulars. It would be as if some denominational executive wrote me a letter telling me to fix the problems here at Greenfield Hill Church. Maybe I'd know what they were talking about, you would know. But 2,000 years from now, it would be pretty vague.

That's what we've got in Jude and Titus, a bunch of churches in trouble — theological disputes, personal immorality, widespread dissension. The scholars suggest that the problems were about cheapening grace, creeping Gnosticism, ongoing issues of identity — since they began as part of Judaism, are they still to be Jewish, not Jewish, half Jewish?

Here's how I approach it. Jude and Titus made it into the Bible. They are obscure, little read, little known, but they are in the Bible for some reason! When all the top dogs of the Christian world were deciding which books got into the Bible and which didn't, Jude and Titus got in. Somebody decided they would still be worth reading 50 years later, 500 years later, 5,000 years later; that folks in our little church up at the intersection of Bronson Road and Old Academy could benefit from Jude and Titus. That's how I approached it. So what's in there for us?

I am not the "grumpy pastor" of the sermon title, and you are not the "grumpy church." But there is still value in there for us. I would summarize the problems in those churches as "they took their eye off the ball." That's one of the best teaching clichés ever, because it's so true. Taken from the world of sports, almost every failed endeavor is a result of "taking your eye off the ball." The shortstop with a ground ball right through his legs. Your big hitter strikes out with the bases loaded. Watch the Super Bowl next Sunday — some great wide receiver will drop a pass that was right in his hands. A golfer hits the ball way off to the right. Or a business loses its biggest client; a nation drifts away from its principles. A couple stops paying attention to each other, a student misses the deadline. We "take our eye off the ball."

So Jude writes to his churches and says, "Contend for the faith entrusted to you" (Jude 3), remember what the apostles told you (Jude 17), build yourself up in your most holy faith (Jude 20), keep yourself in God's love" (Jude 21). And Paul writes to Titus about "the knowledge of truth that leads to godliness (Titus 1:1), the word brought to light by preaching entrusted to

me (Titus 1:3), hold firm to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, encourage others in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), be sound in the faith (Titus 1:13), teach what is in accord with the sound doctrine (Titus 2:1)."

In other words, keep your eye on the ball! Because some folks have drifted, they've gotten caught up in other stuff — incidentals, pettiness, personalities, turf battles, small stuff, ego, vanity, pride, power. You'll need to get back to the basics. *The basics*. "Ah, there's the rub." People have been fighting about the basics ever since that first Easter Sunday. What's essential? What's optional? What's silly?

All that grumpy stuff in Jude and Titus keeps happening over and over. People keep grumbling, fighting, dividing, hurting. Just look at our little neighborhood in Fairfield. We've got this church and the Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Catholic Church down on Brookside. Martin Luther got kicked out of the Catholic Church. The Episcopalians quit the Catholics. The Congregationalists ran away from the Episcopalians. And none of that was as simple as I just described it. There were burnings at the stake, beheadings, folks being drawn and quartered, imprisonments, beatings, confiscation. All because someone's basic got trampled. Somebody "took his eye off a ball" that somebody else thought should have been watched more carefully. But what's the basic? What's the ball we need to keep our eye on?

Jude says the bottom line is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." He's not quite that blunt. He says the problem is that the troublemakers have messed up the idea of "grace" and with it the idea of Jesus the Christ. Which means they've messed up love. Grace is all about love. Grace is unmerited favor, God's unconditional love, the love that motivates the person and purpose of Jesus AND the love that motivates our response, our love back to God, and our love outward toward the world around us. When love is messed up, when grace doesn't matter, when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored or mocked, then all the things we read about it in obscure Jude and obscure Titus turn out to be real: the liars, backstabbers, grumblers and schemers, the scoffers and dividers. But when LOVE is front and center, when God's LOVE is our theology, our creed, the centerpiece of our faith, well ...

I've been reading our church's Annual Report this week. Maybe you think that means I need a better social life, but it's actually interesting reading: 74 new members this year, 41 in the Confirmation class, 200 to Appalachia, \$147,000 given by our Mission Board to help others, the Dogwood Festival made \$74,000. Our church got a historic preservation grant of \$192,000 to repair our roof. Biggest vacation Bible school ever. We finished the year in

the black. We have more people pledging for 2012 than ever, and we have been with more people through all of life's travails and triumphs. Some folks might say that's luck. Some might say that's love. How you answer that is probably a Rorschach test of what you think about our ministry and the state of your faith.

For me, it's proof of the power of love. Wherever love permeates this church, we are strong. The only hurts inflicted are when love falls apart or gets demoted. I'm still thinking about grumpiness and when it rears its head, and when it doesn't. And the simple truth is, the reality is there's never any grumpiness when we are hard at work, loving.

Our church has 32 years of sending hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people from 13 years old to 80 years old to the hollers of Appalachia. I've been around for 15 of them, and I've never heard a single story of grumpiness during the work of God's love.

I've been to India 30 times, taken hundreds of people on mission trips. I've taken groups to Africa, Latin America, Haiti. We've faced civil war and terrorists and no food, no water, and disease. Enemies and crooks and snakes, and never had any grumpiness during the work of God's love.

We've been feeding the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the poor at St. George's soup kitchen for 13 years, in blizzards and during summer heat waves, understaffed and overstaffed, and never once, not once in 13 years, have I heard a grumbling, lazy grumpiness during the work of God's love.

Our pastoral care ministry is off the charts. We are with people in the midst of every single imaginable, even unimaginable, circumstance. And there is no grumpiness, not during the work of God's love.

Alida and I went to see the new Tom Hanks 9/11 movie, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." I don't want to ruin it for you, and I don't want to steal from Alida a good illustration in some upcoming sermon. Let me just say this. In the story of what the boy in the movie calls "the worst day," in this story of heart-ripping grief and heart-stopping brokenness, love wins.

That's all Jude and Titus were saying to those miserable churches full of grumpy people. Love wins. That's our church.

As we prepare for our annual meeting, this little, old, creaky, almost country church, sitting on the same tiny piece of property since 1726 ... as we prepare for our 286th annual meeting, with little kids crawling all over the church house and teenagers packing the barn, and eight days till we see the

hungry again, and 200 already signed up for ASP, and the lights still on for Dogwood #77, and our medical team just back from India, and Alida's FOCI team heading off in 14 days, and our elderly and our shut-ins, our sick and our sorrowing embraced, and our bills paid, and our future bright ... the only explanation is: LOVE wins.

And what's ahead? We've got some great weddings, some happy baptisms, a fun Confirmation, a glorious Easter. And when there's sickness and sorrow and hurt and loss, we will walk through the valley, we will smile through the tears, we will remember that first Easter, when church really began.

Because ... love wins.