

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: This and That
Scripture: Acts 2:42-47
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Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Every year or so I preach a sermon I call "This and That," a sort of collection of points rather than the usual sermon. Most sermons are of two types. The most classic is the three-point sermon. For example:

- Point 1: God loves you.
- Point 2: You should love God back.
- Point 3: The best way to do that is to love others.

Three points, each following from the other. A variation on that is the classic description of a good speech. Tell them what you're going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you just told them. I'm more likely to have one point and just pound it home from 10 or 15 different directions.

Today is just a hodgepodge brought about by the fact that this is the first Sunday of our church's "summer season," 12 weeks, from now through Labor Day. Here's summer for folks around here: Sailing. Barbecues. Nantucket. Lacrosse camps. Baseball/soccer/field hockey camps. Computer camps. College visits. Vermont. Golf. Picnics. Beach Club. Beach reading. Taking kids to college. It's a nice life, but it's still life.

Life goes on all summer in all its manifestations. People will lose their jobs this summer. People will find a job. People will get sick and will get better. People will die and grieve. People will get angry, fight, doubt. People will get married. People will move. People will retire. Babies will be born. And be baptized.

Our church job is to be here for all of it. When you're on Nantucket, we are here. When you're in the hospital, we are here. When you're angry, we are here. When you're off to college, we are here.

There is a great verse in the Bible, 2 Timothy 4:2, it's a paradox. "Be instant in and out of season." Scholars interpret that as "Be prepared in and out of season, be ready, be in the now, be on duty, be awake, alert, involved, in and out of season." In which case there is really no "out of season."

I got caught up watching the Women's College Softball World Series this year. A local girl from Masuk High School is a great pitcher for Louisiana State, so I watched a bit. One team, and I apologize, I can't remember which one, but one team was explaining its success this year, and how they got to the World Series. The captain said, "Last summer, we stayed at college all summer, we worked out together, we pushed one another, we practiced." That was last *summer*. Their summer *vacation*. Their beach time, down time, sleep-till-noon time, hang-out-with-old-friends, drink-beer till-midnight time. Their "out-of-season" time. Instead, they chose to be "*instant*" "in and out of season." They didn't have an off-season. Instead, they hung together, banded together, worked together. And made it to the World Series.

Some people go all out. Some folks go half out. Some churches go all out. Some churches go half out. You've heard me talk about a church I served many years ago. They were closed 12 weeks in the summer. I mean shut down, doors locked, lights off, nothing's happening, a "Do Not Disturb" sign to the whole town. I said, "What am I supposed to do for 12 weeks?" "Nothing," they said, "nobody's around, everybody's away, so relax."

What's interesting is this had been one of the great churches in New England back in the '40s and '50s, but by the time I went there, it was in a long 25-year decline, and they were *closed* 12 weeks of the year, and they didn't see any connection.

Well, O.K., I did it their way for two years. I relaxed. I observed. After two years, I said, "I've noticed something. You said everybody's away all summer. But I noticed the pizzerias are open all summer, and the banks and the YMCA and the hospital." So we reopened.

And I said to our church, Greenfield Hill, before I even moved into the Parsonage, that we were going to stay strong, all summer.

Now, please, listen to me. I'm not presenting myself as some sort of martyr, "Woe are we, Alida and I work sooooo hard. Please appreciate us." We've got a great life here. We love it. We enjoy ourselves immensely. And we tell you all about it in our sermons. We work hard. We play hard.

Alida went into the City this week to see an off-Broadway play that presented all seven *Harry Potter* books in 90 minutes, and she's got a week's vacation coming up in Appalachia later this month. It's a good life. And part of that good life is having a great church. But what's a great church?

Our church Bible study the past few weeks has been really interesting. Great topics, great discussion. We've been looking at the first few days and weeks of Christianity. After his resurrection on Easter, Jesus hung around his Disciples for 40 days, convincing them that he was real, alive! Then Jesus went off to Heaven. Ten days later, on Pentecost, what we now call Christianity was launched with a bang, a loud bang, a spectacular outpouring of God's power. And almost instantly, Christians went from 120 to 3,000 to 10,000!

They weren't even a church, then, they weren't a religion, they didn't have the New Testament, no creeds, no buildings. But what they had was one another. And this is what they did. Acts, Chapter 2 reports, "They devoted themselves to the teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. They were together ... and gave to anyone according to their needs ... meeting together in the temple ... and praising God." (Acts 2:42-47) Acts, Chapter 4 adds, "They were one in heart and mind, they shared everything they had, and they testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 4:32-33)

All together, those verses list five distinct activities, and two of them had to do with food. Two out of five, 40% of early church life was food. And how successful was that? The Bible says, "They enjoyed the favor of everyone, and the Lord added to their number daily." (Acts 3:47). People loved it.

My daughter and grandchildren just returned to India after a wonderful whirlwind two-week visit. We had a ball, day after day. So I was reviewing it all in my head and realized ... mostly we ate. We went to Six Flags, and we ate. We went to the movies, and we ate. We played sports, then we ate. We went to church, then we ate. We had parties, and we ate. Or, as the Bible

puts it, "We broke bread and had fellowship together, one in heart and mind, sharing everything."

It turns out to be a great model for grandparents. It was a great policy and strategy for church growth, and it's fun. So that's the plan for Greenfield Hill Church. Worship. Teaching. Eating. More eating. And helping others.

I told somebody that next Sunday is the *perfect Sunday*, according to the Biblical model. The *perfect Sunday*, we'll gather together for worship. We'll dedicate our huge Appalachia mission team. We'll teach the heart of the Gospel. Then we'll enjoy our all-church picnic. All one package. Seamless. Together. All of it church. Not church, *then* ASP. Not church, *then* picnic. Church. *All of it.*

And also this summer, we are launching something new. I'm calling it "Communal Table." At least once a month, Alida and I will be hosting an eating/teaching/fellowship event, built around some topic. It might be lunch, it might be brunch, it might be dessert, it might be breakfast. But together we'll tackle something and enjoy it. Just like in the Bible. How important is this?

Let me close with two very different church/eating stories. Our church has been feeding the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, at St. George's Soup Kitchen in Bridgeport for 14 years, on the first Monday of every month. St. George's is an Episcopal church that is really hurting. They're broke, they may close. They don't have enough to run the feeding program any longer, even with folks like us providing the food. There is a heartache there, a sense of loss, a slow-motion tragedy unfolding. Because it's about so much more than a "soup kitchen." It's a home away from home, it's dinner. It's people. It's family.

At the other end of the spectrum is a childhood memory. My father pastored a little church in Queens. Little, but dynamic; little, but memorable. And one of my favorite memories is Lent. I've often told you, "I love Lent." It's one of the reasons we make Lent so special here at Greenfield Hill. And that's built on my memory of Lent. "Potluck Suppers," "Casserole Suppers." Everybody came to church on Wednesday nights, bringing a casserole dish to share. Likewise, one morning each week for Lent, grammar school kids and high school kids gathered in a church basement for breakfast together. At both events, the potluck suppers and the school kids' breakfasts, we worshiped and prayed and sang, and somebody preached and somebody taught.

But it was the togetherness, around a table, "breaking bread and fellowship," the chatter and laughter, and yes, I'm sure there was flirtation

and pigtail-pulling and trash-talking and adolescent behavior. But even today, when old-timers from the neighborhood get together, they remember those meals. It was church.

You know the old saying, "We don't have to reinvent the wheel." It means we can look to the past to figure out how to go forward. And you know the old saying, "It isn't rocket science." Both are true when it comes to church. It isn't rocket science. And we *don't* have to reinvent the wheel.

People still want to learn. People still want to pray. People still want to help others. People still want to be together. People still like to eat. That's church.

That's us.