

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: (Un)Dead Church
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-18

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

This seems like a good Sunday to talk about CHURCH. This is Dogwood Festival Sunday, and next week is Confirmation Sunday. Dogwood threatens to swallow up church, some have said, and I hasten to add that I don't believe that!

Confirmation, with 44 kids being confirmed last year and 38 this year, says loud and clear, "We're still here and doing fine!" Back to the Dogwood comment, I've said it before so it's no secret. When I was first hired to be your pastor, another pastor, who claimed to know this church, told me, "You'll grow to hate the Dogwood Festival." I thought he was nuts then, and now I know he was nuts ... or jealous, or both.

This is actually my 17th Dogwood. Alida has 23 under her belt, and it's clear: Dogwood is doing fine, and our church is stronger than ever. Stop to think about it for a minute. Dogwood brings together our 200 church volunteers, all working altruistically for the benefit of others. Dogwood brings thousands of visitors up here to the top of this hill to see our church in action. Dogwood raises a lot of money that helps the poor and needy. The whole effort

strengthens our church, enhances our church, blesses our church. What was that other pastor's problem? I think in his own inept way, he was trying to remind us that it's easy to get caught up in the hoopla and to lose our focus as a church. Our challenges, our goal, should always be how to be church right in the middle of Dogwood, how not to lose our way in the midst of all the blossoms and the beauty. In other words, remember who we are and what we are. We are a church.

The Dogwood story, of course, is centered in faith. It begins with the "Legend of the Dogwood," the dogwood blossoms represent the cross; the red tip on each blossom represents the blood of Christ; the center of the blossom represents the crown of thorns. All together leading to the legend that Christ died for us on a dogwood tree.

From the "Legend of the Dogwood," to our own little neighborhood, surrounded by the beauty of dogwoods, it was only a small step to having a Dogwood Festival 78 years ago. A few church ladies put up a church card table on the church lawn, right in front of the church and sold church fudge to help the church do its church work. Dogwood is church.

As you can imagine, as a pastor, I spend all my life thinking about church. It's my calling; it's my bread and butter. It's my love. I grew up in the church. My father was my pastor. His father was his pastor. I always say everything I know about being a pastor I learned from my father.

It just so happens that our new church Bible Study is about the Book of Acts, which tells how the church came to be. Nowadays we call church an "institution," and church is "organized religion." But 2,000 years ago, it was not an institution, and it was very definitely NOT organized. What you had was a bunch of people who really, really, really believed that Jesus was terrific, amazing, *and* raised from the dead; *and* therefore, worth believing, worth following, worth worshipping.

What I just said to you is pretty much St. Peter's first sermon, on Pentecost, when he addressed the crowds in Jerusalem and tried to convince them that "Jesus was terrific, amazing, *and* raised from the dead; *and* therefore, worth believing, worth following, worth worshipping!" To his amazement, 3,000 people agreed! And wanted to join — no institution, no organized religion. No buildings. No clergy. No rules. All they had were people walking around, with the temple in the background, enjoying one another ... sort of like Dogwood.

It took years for the church to become "organized" and to be an "institution." Indeed, its founding imagery is that of "family." Christ is the

bridegroom. (Matthew 9:15) The Church is the "bride." (Revelation 21:2) Holy Communion was an "Agape Feast," a love feast. We are the "children of God." (John 1:2) God is our "heavenly father." (Matthew 6) We are the "sons and daughters." (2 Corinthians 6:18) We are God's "inheritors," "joint heirs" with Christ. (Romans 8:17) And if that's not clear enough, Jesus said bluntly, "Whoever does God's will is my brother, my sister, my mother." (Matthew 12:50) We are family. (Hebrews 2:11) Plain and simple, church is family. Sort of like Dogwood.

Now, I understand that I have the easy job. While many of you are slaving away in little rooms, selling and transacting and haggling, or standing over the hot grill or parking cars or organizing and answering and worrying, I get to be sort of the family patriarch, like the old grandfather at a family reunion. People come to Dogwood and seek Alida and me out to tell us they're getting married. They come to find us to show us they're pregnant, or they bring by their little baby in a stroller.

One of the most poignant experiences of my life happened at Dogwood. Nick Kapetan came to see me on a Dogwood Sunday two years ago. He was battling pancreatic cancer, and he came to say goodbye. He wanted to be up here at the Dogwood Festival with his church family, surrounded by memories one last time. Church is family.

This past week we had four funerals in five days. That should have been hard, right? Overwhelming. Sorrowful. Would you believe joyful? Fun? Inspiring? Even happy? We began with 10-year-old Mikey Fedak and ended with 99-year-old Richard Brayton, and in between we had Jim McMahan and Thora Russell.

At Mikey's service, his brother put together a terrific five-piece combo. They sang an old rock 'n' roll song popular from the kids' TV show "Barney" that brought the house down. Betsy Milicia and John Russell told stories about Thora that had us both weeping and laughing. At Mr. Brayton's funeral, we told how in his final, 100th year, he became quite worried that the draft board was coming after him to reenlist. He was quite insistent that his son notify the government that he had done his duty. He fought in World War II and, at 99, had had quite enough. All of this, all of the laughter, all of the stories, all of the joy were firmly embedded in faith, plenty of Scripture, plenty of preaching, plenty of prayer. We sang "Onward Christian Soldiers," and "How Great Thou Art." But what made it all work, what kept us all from being mired in the maudlin and mourning, what enabled us to weep with laughter was the whole sense of church as family.

I wish you could have seen Mikey's funeral. We had six little 5th-graders get right up here and speak. Five spoke and one sang. These are 5th-graders, 10 years old, at the funeral of their friend, and they stood right here and grabbed that microphone and said their piece. How could Mikey's parents and Thora's family and Richard's family get up here and share their stories, read their poems, tell their Scriptures, proud and bold, and with joy? Because this is family. This church isn't imposing or rigid. This isn't an institution, and God knows we're hardly organized. But as a family, we do great. Sort of like Dogwood.

Next week, Dogwood is done, and we will be full bore into Confirmation, one of the great highlights of church. Thirty-eight 8th-graders will stand right here. Kneel right here. And make their own decision to take church seriously. They've looked long and hard at Jesus. They've seen and heard what he said and did. They know what he stands for. They know what he expects of them. And they know this church works hand in hand with Christ. And they like that. And our Confirmation class knows better than anybody that we are NOT organized. This is NOT an institution. When you spend a year of Monday nights with Alida and me, you know one thing. Church is family. The "family" part we've got down pat. We are loud, messy, frantic, crazy, busy. And through it all, the love shines through, somehow. And they like that.

This sermon hasn't gone where I expected it to go, especially when I was putting the church bulletin together and coming up with a title, "(Un)Dead Church," and putting my poem in there. Sermons, especially mine, have a way of meandering. I picked the first hymn today, "How Great Thou Art," because George Beverly Shea recently died at age 104. George Beverly Shea was Billy Graham's right-hand man, his featured soloist for 50 years, a great big man with a great big baritone voice, and his signature song was "How Great Thou Art." Some songs just evoke church and make you feel good about it.

I remember Len Morgan's funeral, the church was packed to the gills, the place was broken-hearted, there must have been 150 young people in attendance, along with all the rest of us, and we did our best to put a good face on, to proclaim our faith, but we were a sad people. But then our soloist, Joseph, sang "How Great Thou Art," and the church was transformed. I was transformed. Church did it. Church worked its magic. Church as family was stronger than death. That says something.

Alida mentioned last Sunday that we are fresh home from our trip to Serbia and Paris, and between the two of us, I'm sure we'll regale you with stories for weeks to come. For today, to end this sermon, I just want to say this:

church is alive, not dead. Europe has this reputation for being spiritually dead — anti-religion, anti-church, anti-God. When I first started visiting Europe, that's what I expected to find. I remember when I first went to Prague about 10 years ago. Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, part of the old "behind-the-Iron-Curtain" Soviet bloc, where God was dead and religion was the "opiate of the masses," where churches were turned into museums and clergy into bystanders. Yet, to my amazement, I found churches alive and exciting, which led me to include "The Gates of Hell," my poem you can find on page 10 of your bulletin, a poem based on Jesus's promise that he would create a church based on faith and "the gates of hell will not prevail" against it.

Nevertheless, heading into the Balkans, still ravaged and split apart by the war of 15 years ago, and into Paris, jam-packed with tourists, I did not expect to enjoy much church life. I told a friend we had visited museums and churches, and he said in Europe that's the only thing churches are — museums." That's *not* what we saw. We saw life people, faith, joy,

I'll close with just one example. On our last Sunday in Paris we went to the Church of Saint-Séverin for Sunday Mass. It was a gorgeous day, and believe me, on a gorgeous day in April in Paris, there's a lot more to do than go to church. The church is about a block off the River Seine, surrounded by cafés and croissants; parks and gardens are beckoning. Yet, Saint-Séverin's was packed to the rafters. There was laughter and joy and kids and families, and during the coffee hour, the Boy Scouts were having a bake sale, and I got hit in the head with a soccer ball, and the priest was friendly and happy. It felt like ... family. Like Greenfield Hill Church, like home.

Believe me, whether it's Saint-Séverin's in Paris or our own little Greenfield Hill Church, we are NOT dead!

The Gates of Hell (Matthew 16:18)

*Across peaceful and hostile lands
spires still inspire
The Church still stands
atheists do their best
to lambaste
religion's excess
nevertheless
The Church*

*with capital "C"
us, we
still stand
and withstand
every
adversary.*

*The Nazis and Communists
have come and gone
no need to be afraid
I saw their May Day Parade*

*Once, yes,
they did suppress
and in time may try again
to mock or oppress
yet
the Church still stands
Gothic, Baroque, whatever
it does matter
the Church is structure
 girth
 heft
 power
Presumed, assumed, exhumed,
Power, symbol and time
beyond fear
when yesterdays are past
the Church is still here.*

*The Gates of hell
cannot prevail.*