

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 13, 2013
Sermon Title: Grace and Peace
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Philippians 4:4-8

Philippians 4:4-8

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

There are lots of ways to do Scripture lessons, lots of ways to learn. Or, someone can read to you. That's how we do it most Sundays. Or, we can read it together. That's how Alida will do it before her message this morning.

I could make you write it on the blackboard 100 times, as my teachers at P.S. 90 used to do. Or you can repeat after me, perhaps the oldest form of learning: rote repetition. So I'm going to ask you to repeat after me just the last verse of my Scripture lesson, Philippians 4:8.

*Whatsoever is true
Whatsoever is noble
Whatsoever is right
Whatsoever is pure
Whatsoever is lovely
Whatsoever is admirable
Whatsoever is excellent or praiseworthy
think on those things ...
And put them into practice.*

I love that. Religion is so full of negatives, prohibitions, don'ts, exclusions, putdowns. But here's St. Paul, a pretty big finger-wagger himself, but when he comes up with his bottom line, he says, "Look for excellence, look for what's good, what's noble and pure, what's right, true, lovely." That's your focus!

It's time for our church's annual stewardship/pledge drive. We're wrapping up one budget year and planning the next. I've been at this pastor job a long time; my family has 230 years as pastors! We've tried every trick in the book for church pledges. It's never easy, never fun.

You can always try guilt. I told one church if they didn't give better, sooner or later they'd have to sell the place. There is now a "For Sale" sign on that church. At one church I had to go door to door to collect pledges. At one house, I walked up on the porch, I rang the doorbell, I heard people inside, the TV was on, I looked in the windows. The whole family was hiding behind the couch. So, yeah, this is not fun.

But you know what IS fun? This church. Being your pastor. This is a wonderful place, which is why I titled my little sermon "Grace and Peace." That's what I experience all the time.

Three quick stories: last Saturday night we launched our "Timothy Dwight Society," to strengthen our endowment for the sake of our future. It was a lovely event at the home of Todd and Terilynn Esse, and in my comments, I mentioned that every time I had been to the Esses' home, it was for an event filled with "grace and peace." And they weren't necessarily easy or simple events.

One was in the aftermath of cancer, one was the marriage of two longtime partners, one was the 10th anniversary of 9/11, a very personal tragedy for them. Any number of feelings would have been understandable: relief, revenge, numbness, sorrow; even victory, triumphalism, and high-five "we did it!" Instead, each event was purely "grace and peace," two of the loveliest words, two of the greatest gifts, "grace and peace."

Grace is the same root word that gives us "gracious" and "graceful," something that is pure, effortless, natural. Theologically, "grace" is God's unconditional love. *Unconditional love*. Practically, "grace" is a gentle elegance, an almost perfect kindness. "Grace."

And "peace," that most elusive of hopes. Biblically, "peace" is even more wonderful than we imagine. It isn't just the absence of conflict. "Peace" is

“shalom,” a well-being that fills every aspect of life. To live with “grace and peace” is to live with such confidence, such faith, such depth of spirit that nothing — hear what I say — *nothing* can take it away.

This week, we’ve had a number of hospital visits. You see the photos of two of them in your bulletin. First is my good buddy Simon, an honest-to-goodness delight, with a smile that fills the room, a strength of will, and an amazing family. He’s just getting started in life. The other is Noyes Spelman, 91 years older than Simon. Noyes was also a good buddy, a honest-to-goodness delight, with a smile that filled the room, a strength of will, an amazing family. His life came to an end on Tuesday. Both Simon does and Noyes did live lives of “grace and peace.”

I was with Simon and his folks this week, a couple of times up at Yale-New Haven Hospital. He has a sort of love-hate relationship with food. He doesn’t mind looking at it or playing with it, but he doesn’t like to eat it. So he doesn’t. Nothing agrees with him. He can’t keep it down. So my little friend Simon, he’s pretty familiar with hospitals. He undergoes tests and procedures and surgeries. He gets poked and probed and pinpricked and needlepricked. But look at that photo! That’s not at Disney World! That was taken right in the middle of his hospitalization. And that’s the same smile I see every visit. That’s the same smile he had when we baptized him at one of our summer services. That’s the same smile he brought to every outdoor church service, all summer long. It’s Simon, his nature, “grace and peace.”

And look at that photo of Noyes Spelman. Noyes grew up next door to our church, right out the window in what is now the Fantons’ house, and next door to that, in Heidi Prom’s house, which was Gene and Edie Moore’s house, which once upon a time was Noyes’s house. Now there’s a new family there. The Hardings, and just last week Noyes went to the house, sat with the Hardings, and told them lots of stories from that old house.

Sunday night, his daughter Anne cooked him his favorite dinner, a meatloaf and potatoes dinner. On Tuesday his nine-decade-long life’s journey came to an end. Alida was with him, prayed with him, just minutes before he passed. I met up with the family at the hospital, and we gathered around Noyes one last time, and it should have been awful, and it should have been sorrowful, and it should have been dramatic. But it was all “grace and peace.” This was a man who fought through some of the worst of World War II — Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Guam — a U.S. Marine, probably as tough as nails. But he lived his life with “grace and peace.” It was his way. It was his style. And when it came time to die, it was the way he died.

What's this got to do with making out your church pledge for 2014? Why not hammer you with guilt? Or bombard you with facts? Or overwhelm you with detail? Did you see how many 3rd-graders got their Bibles last Sunday? Do you know how many 8th-graders are signed up for Confirmation? Do you know how much it costs to open our church each day? Do you know the price of oil, of health insurance, of snow removal, of upkeep? We could do that. But Alida and I have been here a long time. We've been here long enough to know the heart of this church. The heart of this church is the amazing "grace and peace" with which our people face life.

As I said, we've been your pastors a long time. We have been with you through every imaginable life's issues, from the worst to the best. And always, there is "grace and peace." You embody the very verse I had you repeat. You do look for "whatsoever is true, whatsoever is noble and right, whatsoever is pure, lovely, and admirable, whatsoever is excellent," and you practice it.

I don't know if it's in the water; I don't know if it's the sermons. I don't know if it's the copper beech tree out front. I don't know if it's how you were brought up. I don't know if it's our Sunday School, our worship, our teaching, but it's how we are. And this kind of church is worth keeping going at the top of our game.

That's why we're asking for your best pledge.