

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Acts 2:41-47

## Acts 2:41-47

*So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

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You're stuck in church. It's freezing outside all week. Metro North can't seem to go north or to the Metro. Our Annual Meeting can't start until I stop preaching. There's another church service tonight that I keep hammering you to attend. Yes, you're stuck in church.

Meanwhile, the religious world around you is dizzyingly confusing. The Mormons, who almost singlehandedly defeated gay marriage in California, are all of a sudden talking about being more open. The Pope keeps making nice comments about other religions, even atheists. The Russian Orthodox Church is in bed with Putin; but in the Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has courageously put itself between the violent dictatorship and the protestors for freedom. Meanwhile, the Buddhists, everyone's favorite Zen poster children for being nice, have turned violent in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. Atheism is more vocal, and yet belief in God, angels, and the devil remains strong. Most people are believers; fewer people are religious,

yet the same percentage of Americans keeps going to church and synagogue week after week. For those of us who are interested in religion, observers of the world of religion, these are interesting times. Truth is, every time is probably an interesting time.

Twenty-six hundred years ago, Hinduism ruled the roost in South Asia; then Buddha comes along, and before you know it, his movement has spread up into the Himalayas, across China, all the way to Japan.

Fourteen hundred years ago, the Middle East was happily coexisting. Jews were left alone to be Jews. Christians were allowed to be Christians, and idol worshipers had their idols. Then Mohammed turned the world upside down.

Two thousand years ago, the religious scene in Israel was simple and clear: Judaism, the Torah, the Temple in Jerusalem. Then Jesus changed the world.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Europe was Catholic. Everybody was Catholic. Heck, the word "catholic" even means "everybody," "universal." Then came all those protesters, protest-ants: Protestants. And we've spent the last 500 years dividing and sub-dividing, fighting, arguing, competing, burning at the stake, Inquisitioning, excommunicating, all in the name of some "God who so loved the world."

Then there is ours, little old Greenfield Hill Church, this little old white box up on top of this ancient hill, quietly going about our business for 288 years. Who are we? What are we about? How do we measure up as a church?

Our Scripture lesson today is a pretty good analytical tool. It takes place in the days and weeks after the first Easter. Jesus gets crucified, killed, then raised from the dead. He spends a few weeks with his disciples, convincing them that he really is real. Then he goes to heaven, leaving it to us to carry on his work. That work begins on what we call "Pentecost," when God empowered those disciples, emboldened them, turned them from frightened, confused, doubting, uneducated, unsophisticated country boys into a mesmerizing, inspiring, challenging, articulate force for good, willing to tackle the world.

That's where today's Scripture begins. It starts with statistics. That first day of official Christianity, that first day of being a "church," it says, "Three thousand were added to their number that day." Yikes! I was feeling pretty good about this past year — the largest Confirmation class we ever had, 38; the largest number of new members, 99; the highest total of pledges ever, 362; and a bunch of other good numbers. So I'm bragging. I'm patting myself on the back, then I listened to Lynn read that Scripture. Three

thousand new members. In one day. Then the last verse says, "And the Lord added to their number DAILY, those who were being saved"! Three thousand all at once, then more every day.

In my annual report every year, I have a section on statistics, numbers. And every year I remind you that each number represents a person. No one is just a number to us. When it says we did 27 baptisms, that's 27 families who woke up one day with a wonderful joy of a new baby in their lives and all that means. And those 27 families each decided they wanted to come to this church, right here with you, to say "thank you" to God and to bring their child and their families into our family. And when it says that we did 31 funerals, that's 31 families who woke up one day only to learn that they had suffered a great loss, a heart-breaking loss, a mind-numbing, soul-numbing loss. And on the worst day of their lives, they turned to us.

The same is true when we say 1,135 members, 52 Sunday School teachers, 110 in Vacation Bible School, 1,200 on Christmas Eve, 225 to Appalachia, 3,350 people who visited in the last year. Each number is a person who made a decision to be here, with us.

But between those numbers, between the "3,000" and the "more added daily" is the heart of today's Scripture. It's what they did as a church. Let me repeat those verses:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They were together. They shared in common and gave to one another according to need. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts. They praised God.*

That's "Church." Those are the basics: teaching, worship, fellowship, mission. Or to put it in Jesus's language, "loving God and loving one another." Or, we could say, serving God and having fun at the same time.

The basics. If you do the basics right, and you do the basics well in anything in life, you will succeed — if you do the basics right, AND you do the basics well: teaching, worship, fellowship, mission, praise God, know your stuff, help others, have fun.

I started this sermon talking about how crazy the world of religion is nowadays. Things have changed a lot since "the good old days" of New England Congregationalism, ruled by the Pilgrims and Puritans, when everyone was expected to go to church, and people's taxes supported the church, and you got fined if you missed church. There was social status

attached to church, and there was prayer in public schools, and, like Garrison Keeler's Lake Wobegone, everybody was good.

Now it's tougher, and maybe that's better. I'll give you an example. It's hard getting people to church on Sunday mornings. Everything else competes: Little League, Youth Soccer, AAU, travel teams, practices, tournaments, road races, Scouts, skiing. This affects kids, parents, grandparents, coaches. This affects us: Sunday School, youth groups, worship.

What to do? Whine? Grumble? Protest? Guilt trip? That's a sure way to success. Not! That's what led to "Sports Worship." I don't want to jinx it; tonight is only our sixth one. But it may be one of the most dynamic, important new ministries we've ever done.

Think about it. Tonight we have two young people leading prayer, two reading Scriptures, four serving Communion, four as ushers. Our Children's Choir is singing, our powerful House Band is singing, two of our All-State soccer players will be honored, the Fairfield Prep football coach is speaking, and I bet there will be a good crowd. And guess what! They'll be worshipping, teaching, offering, and having fun.

That's "Church." It's been forced upon us by societal changes, so we're taking this whole sports world that we think of as secular, a competitor, a problem, ruining our attendance, we're taking all that and bringing it right here, right in this sanctuary, right up on this altar. It will be fun, fellowship, and faith. That's "Church."

Now let me say a word about money. From Day One in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, the church needed money. The Bible says, "All the believers shared everything, selling their possessions and goods, giving to anyone according to their need." Very quickly, that church was overwhelmed by need and opportunity and sacrifices, by growth and challenges. Very quickly, church was a business. It needed money.

My view of money at Greenfield Hill Church is very simplistic, which is why we let smarter people run our finances, thank goodness. Still, hear me out. My simple summary of church finances is this: In 2013 we took in a lot of money, we spent a lot of money, we gave away a lot of money, and we're still standing. That's a good year. Must we do better? Yes. To break even, we need more. To do more, we need more. The good news is we have the people, we have the wherewithal, but we're still learning how to ask.

We are a church made up mostly of New Englanders and Midwesterners. We are hesitant, even shy. At work we are aggressive, edgy, bold, demanding, successful. At church we are reserved, refined, quiet.

That's what makes Connecticut Connecticut. We've got New England reserve joined with New York City pizzazz. We want our church to be New England and our careers to be New York. And mostly that's a good blend. But to be frank, we're going to need some New York edge to get the money we need to be the church we want.

To tell you the truth, I'm actually incredibly excited to be a pastor, to be at this church in this era. Yes, the world of religion is crazy and confusing. But at the very same time, the world yearns for what we have. People yearn to believe. People yearn to do good.

Friday we went to the movies, and at the theater there was one huge movie poster ad for an upcoming movie, "Son of God," and a particularly long movie preview for an upcoming movie, "Noah," starring Russell Crowe and Anthony Hopkins. Somebody's gambling a whole lot of money on enough folks yearning to believe.

A major part of our church life is equipping you to believe, to know, to think, to learn, to decide. That's what preaching is about. And Bible Study, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Adult Ed. Day after day, week after week, we say, "Here's the Bible, here's the church, here's our faith, here's the world we live in. Mix it all up, see how one can bless the other." That's "Church."

And last but not least: George and Betsy Longstreth. Many of you remember when the Longstreths lived here — active in our church, active in the community, sang in our choir for decades. Sitting up in the choir loft, they heard all my endless stories about India and made a decision to go to India. Year after year after year after year. Sixteen years in a row. Dr. Longstreth is a surgeon, and each year he takes a team to our FOCI [Friends of Christ in India] hospital just to bring God's healing touch, God's loving touch to a very hurting piece of the world.

This year's team consists of 19 American and Indian doctors and nurses. They did over 200 surgeries. They saw over 500 patients. They have resurrected an old mission hospital to its original mission. Their whole effort is remarkable, miraculous, Christlike.

And it all began with George and Betsy sitting in this sanctuary, hearing the Bible read each Sunday and preached each Sunday. Their hearts were touched. They were energized. They were called. They responded. This isn't a story about FOCI. This is about "Church."

When we do what is right, and we do it well, that's "Church." And the world is better for it, our little corner, even this little church on top of this ancient hill and other little corners near and far.

"And the Lord added to their number daily."