

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Give Me That Old-time Religion  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: John 1:43-51

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## John 1:43-51

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

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Last week I was in Middlebury, Vermont, to preach at my Uncle Gerald's funeral. He was my father's older brother. I thought I would use his death (or really more use his life) to look at the other side of Christian ministry.

Last Sunday my sermon was tougher. I preached about the Old Testament prophets in light of the terrorist killing of all the people on the Malaysian airplane over Ukraine; about the explosive, endless, faithless war in the Middle East; and about the immigration crisis of teenagers and children from Central America.

To help make sense of it all, as Christians, last Sunday we looked hard at the harsh things those old prophets had to say about corrupt governments,

bad religion, ruthless businesses, and useless leaders; and how the prophets wrapped up their whole message with stirring calls for justice and rightness and mercy. Then we ended with that great majestic hymn, "Once to Every Man and Nation":

*Once to every man and nation,  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood,  
For the good or evil side.*

We live at such a time of choice, don't we, for truth or falsehood, or good or evil?

Today is a softer Sunday, gentler, as we think about church and life and ministry at its best. My Uncle Gerald and my father, both pastors for over 70 years, led essentially the same lives. The one difference is that my father's ministry focused on urban New York City, Queens and Brooklyn, and my uncle's ministry was mostly up in rural Vermont. But other than that, they were both "old-time" pastors, sticking to the basics: good preaching, attentive pastoral care.

They both coached baseball for years, starting Little Leagues and Babe Ruth Leagues. They both had amazing wives, they both raised good daughters and rebellious sons, they both made an impact on a lot of lives the old-fashioned way.

They worked hard, gave it their all, did their best. That's why I've titled this sermon, "Give Me That Old-time Religion" because they are an increasingly rare connection to that old-time religion. In America we are very conscious of every day losing more of that "Greatest Generation," those quietly heroic soldiers who fought World War II. We know that what they stood for and how they did things were special, and with their passing we are all losing something good.

It's the same in church. In church life, pastors used to be called "Soldiers of the Cross," and they too, like my uncle, were part of that great generation who helped build a new America after the war, when life and hope and change filled the air, brimming with optimism. And we know what those pastors stood for and how they did things were special, and with their passing we are all losing something good.

So my sermon today is an ode to all those old-time religion pastors who did things with the humility and simplicity and purity that should be treasured. You know what I'm talking about. Many of you have told me about pastors

from your own “good old days.” Not fancy, not arrogant, not on a pedestal, not above it all.

Of course, some of you old-timers know that my sermon title comes from an “old-time religion” gospel hymn. If any of you dare to sing along with me:

*Give me that old-time religion,  
Give me that old-time religion,  
Give me that old-time religion,  
And it's good enough for me.*

*It was good for Paul and Silas,  
It was good for Paul and Silas,  
It was good for Paul and Silas,  
And it's good enough for me.*

There are a couple of verses like that, and then it builds to the final verse:

*It was good for my dear old mother,  
It was good for my dear old mother,  
It was good for my dear old mother,  
And it's good enough for me!*

In other words, we don't need to gussy it up. We don't need to put on airs or get all fancy. Old-time religion, old-time church is sort of like macaroni and cheese, good comfort food that does its job every time. Solid. Dependable. Good.

Preaching at my uncle's funeral gave me the chance to focus on what matters, what counts, what is good. I began with Psalm 1, the “Psalm of a Good Man,” it's called.

*Blessed is the man who does not scoff or scorn but whose delight is in the Lord. He's like a tree planted by streams of water, which produces fruit in its season, whose leaves do not wither and who prospers in all he does.*

My uncle was a good man, and he prospered in his own way as a good pastor, the old-fashioned way. He was the church sexton, the church secretary; he shoveled snow in winter so folks could get into the church. He printed the Sunday bulletins. He stoked the old furnace in the basement. My aunt played the piano for the hymns. My uncle led the singing on a trumpet. People talked about his prayers, his visits, his million acts of kindness. A town official said that politics had taught him that not everybody is nice, so

he came to see my uncle each week to remember that there were still some nice people.

At my uncle's funeral I used the same Scripture we are using today. Early in Jesus's ministry he gathered a small group of disciples, people who made a decision to follow Jesus, often as a result of a direct invitation. Jesus went right up to Matthew, to Peter and Andrew, James and John, even at their workplace, and invited them to follow him. Philip was one person directly invited by Jesus. But Philip took it one step further. He went out and found a friend of his, Nathanael, and Philip invited Nathanael to follow Jesus.

I've just given you a pretty good summary of old-time religion, using several of the key words: disciples, invitation, decision, follow. In old-time religion, the goal is salvation, to save the world, one person at a time. In many churches, the sermons end with an "invitation"; the preacher specifically and pointedly invites people to make an intentional decision to get up out of their pews, walk down the aisle, come down front, and make that public decision to follow Christ, to become true disciples. There are whole hymns and songs called "invitation hymns" to help people get in the mood for making crucial decisions to accept that beautiful invitation to personally follow Christ.

We all know the hymn, "Just As I Am."

*Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
O, Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

On the way home after the funeral, I listened on NPR to an old classic 1994 "Prairie Home Companion," when Garrison Keillor took his whole show to the original, famous Grand Old Opry at the Ryman Auditorium. Keillor reminded everyone that it had been built in the late 1800s as a church tabernacle, with pews and stained-glass windows, as a place to celebrate that "old-time religion." To honor that history, that "Prairie Home Companion" had a lot of gospel music, including an old "invitation hymn" done by country music star Vince Gill, singing "Drifting Too Far From the Shore," a not-too-subtle implication that you had better shape up because you're drifting too far away from safe harbor:

## **“Drifting Too Far From The Shore”**

*Out on the perilous deep,  
where danger silently creeps,  
and storm's so violently sweeping,  
You're drifting too far from shore.*

*Drifting too far from shore,  
You're drifting too far from shore,  
Come to Jesus today,  
Let Him show you the way.  
You're drifting too far from shore,*

*Today, the Tempest rose high,  
and clouds o'ershadow the sky.  
Sure death is hovering nigh,  
You're drifting too far from shore.*

That old-time religion, just like macaroni and cheese, wants you to feel at home, be safe, know that you're O.K. That's why you get an invitation to make a decision to follow Jesus. My Uncle Gerald devoted his life to that old-time religion with more emphasis on heaven than on hellfire and brimstone.

My dad and uncle grew up on the Advent Christian Campground of Mechanic Falls, Maine, up near Lewiston, where my grandfather was a pastor. The Advent Christians are a small Baptist-like denomination with a special emphasis on the “second coming of Christ,” the imminent return of Jesus to this earth, defeating the devil once and for all and establishing God's kingdom forever.

This emphasis led to a very careful reading of current events in light of Biblical prophecy about the end of the world. You'll be interested to hear that for my grandfather's life he taught that the final battle, “Armageddon,” would take place in the Middle East, and the real bad guy, the Antichrist, would be from Russia. If my grandfather were alive this very morning, and he opened up the Sunday *New York Times*, he would just point to the front page and say, “I told you so.”

That kind of urgency to save the world before it was too late drove my uncle and father into ministry, but with a difference. People used to say about my grandfather that when he was preaching about Christ's coming back to earth and about Judgment Day, he was so convincing that when the sermon was over, half the church couldn't wait to rush outside in the hope that it had

happened, and the other half of the church was afraid to go outside in case it had happened.

But my uncle and father entered church ministry in the 1940s, and they used their lives to better the world. It's a subtle difference but an important one. For my grandfather, the world was going to heck in a hand basket so you'd better be ready, spiritually ready, for Judgment Day. For my uncle and father, the same world is in the same trouble, so let's try to fix it. They still kept Christ at the center, they still stood foursquare with the Bible, but they approached it all with a more positive attitude, more hopeful. It's the old "half-glass" idea. Some see a glass half-full, some see it as half-empty, and both are correct . . . but one leaves you more hopeful than the other. And my uncle was always full of hope.

Maybe that came from being a marathon runner. You can't really be a marathon runner if you're not hopeful. He ran Boston many times, and he was still winning age-group races into his mid-80s.

When I received word that uncle Gerald had died, my very first thought was of a photo my father keeps on his desk of my uncle running, and on his face there is this wonderful, joyful smile. In fact, at the funeral reception, there were several photos of him running, and in every photo he is smiling. Over his shoulder you could see lots of other runners, and they are not smiling. I was a runner most of my life. Every single day, no matter what, for 40 years, and I never smiled, not once. It was duty. It was excessive. It was agony. It may even have been good for me. But I never smiled.

When I ran cross-country in prep school, we used to say that running was like beating your head against a brick wall. We do it because it feels so good when we stop. But not for Uncle Gerald. Uncle Gerald had the heart of a runner, but he did it because he loved it, and he could smile because the whole journey was worth it. As a lifelong pastor and a lifelong runner, he knew all about heartache.

The Boston Marathon even has its famous "Heartbreak Hill," a place that anticipates breaking your will, breaking your spirit, making you want to just lie down, have a beer, and go to sleep. So he knew all about Heartbreak Hill as a runner and all the thousand heartaches of a pastor's life. But Uncle Gerald kept smiling because he knew how it turns out. As an athlete, as a Christian, as a pastor, as a person, Uncle Gerald lived his life always on the side of hope.

A lot of people think St. Paul was either a runner or at least a big fan of running because his Scriptures are full of running references. "Press on,"

Paul tells us about our Christian life, "Run the race that has been set before you . . ." (Hebrews 12:1) "Don't let others cut you off." (Galatians 5:7) "Press on toward the prize," (Philippians 3:14) so that when all is said and done, we can say, along with St. Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my race, and now there is prepared for me the crown of victory, the crown of righteousness." (2 Timothy 4:7)

That's a good life. You give it your best for as long as you can, and when you're done, all the more power to you. You did it right.

This week Alida and I took Brigitta and our granddaughter Anusha on a whirlwind "excellent adventure." College tours of Harvard and MIT, dinner in the North End of Boston, whitewater rafting, and museum visits up in the Berkshires, rounded off with the scariest rides at Six Flags. We also had plenty of time for fun conversation, both profound and silly, on all sorts of topics. At one point Brigitta asked us all, "What's the best advice you've ever heard?" And she and I agreed on the saying, "Pour yourself out on the field." In other words, whatever you're doing, give it your all. No half-measures, no half-efforts, don't go back into the locker room having to admit, "Well I guess I could have tried harder, given more." *Pour yourself out on the field.*

My Uncle Gerald lived his life to the fullest he had to offer, to the best he could, and he didn't stop till it was over. In the Scripture lesson, I told about Philip and Nathanael. There is an interesting exchange. Philip tells Nathanael "I found the Messiah, he's from Nazareth," and Nathanael responds with a snicker. "What good can come out of Nazareth?" A snide comment, yet he still agreed to meet Jesus. And when Jesus sees him, Jesus offers this wonderful compliment: "Behold, here is a man in whom there is no guile." Modern translations put it as "a man in whom there is nothing false." A straight-shooter. What you see is what you get. Nathanael wasn't perfect. But he was honest even when he was snide, and he was open, he was willing to still learn.

My uncle retired from that Baptist Church in Middlebury much loved and much revered, and he continued to be part of the church until his death. Recently, the church wanted to hire a woman pastor, and Uncle Gerald was opposed, so he planned to go to the church meeting and vote against her. My Aunt Persis was not happy with him, so he said he would just go and sit there and not vote. My aunt didn't like that either. "What if that was your daughter?" she asked her husband, "what if your daughter heard God's call to be a pastor?" My uncle, with 90-plus years under his belt, with 70 years in the ministry, with a lifetime in the Bible, my uncle thought about it, prayed about it, and voted to have a woman pastor.

That's how you finish the race. You don't coast, you don't sleepwalk. You don't just go through the motions. You run hard right through the finish line. You "pour yourself out on the field."

Best of all, Uncle Gerald's funeral service was a macaroni and cheese, old-time religion, comfort food funeral, and you felt better just being there. Just like our hymns today, we sang our faith as if we believed it.

### **I Love To Tell The Story"**

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above  
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;  
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

### **"Wonderful Words of Life"**

*Sing them over again to me,  
Wonderful words of life,  
Let me more of their beauty see,  
Wonderful words of life;  
Words of life and beauty  
Teach me faith and duty.*

*Beautiful words, wonderful words,  
Wonderful words of life;  
Beautiful words, wonderful words,  
Wonderful words of life.*

### **"Blessed Assurance"**

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long;  
This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long.*



Those old-time religion hymns make heaven so real you can reach out and touch it. When Uncle Gerald's funeral was over, I was escorting my father to the church basement for the reception. Another old pastor, 91 years old, came up to my father, embraced him and said cheerfully "We're going home soon, aren't we? Isn't that grand? We're going home soon." They were both smiling.

Our final hymn is old-time religion about heaven, about "going home soon."

### **Beyond The Sunset**

*Beyond the sunset, O blissful morning.  
When with our Saviour heaven's begun.  
Earth's toiling ended, O glorious dawning  
Beyond the sunset when day is done.*

*Beyond the sunset, no clouds will gather.  
No storms will threaten, no fears annoy.  
O day of gladness, O day unending.  
Beyond the sunset eternal joy.*

*Beyond the sunset, O glad reunion,  
With our dear loved ones who've gone before,  
In that fair homeland we'll know no parting.  
Beyond the sunset forever more.*