

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 9, 2014  
Sermon Title: Peace  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

## Matthew 5:1-12 - *The Beatitudes*

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

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"Throw the bums out!" That's a common phrase the week before every election. "Throw the bums out," with "bums" as a sort of classic derogatory term for what people in my old neighborhood called "no-goodniks." But growing up in New York City, to me "bums" was also a term of endearment. The old Brooklyn Dodgers were called "dem bums," loveable lugs playing in the shadow of Jackie Gleason's "The Honeymooners."

My point is "bums" are in the eye of the beholder. One person's derogatory loser bum is somebody else's beloved hero. I guess that's the nature of every competition—politics, sports, or anything that pits one side against another.

During the World Series, when I was rooting rabidly for the San Francisco Giants, every person I bumped into while bragging about the Giants turned out to be a Kansas City Royals fan. Life is just like that. You remember the old saying, "I say *tomayto*, and you say *tomahto*. I say potato, you say ... French fries." We are not all cut from the same cloth—politically, religiously, socially, culturally.

We have differences of opinion, taste, likes and dislikes about everything. Yet, most of the world—not everybody, but most of the world—has evolved to the level where we really do want to get along. In fact, we not only WANT to get along, we also realize we NEED to get along. We need to figure it out.

Not everybody, not the North Korean guy, not the Russian guy, not the ISIS guy, not the Boko Haram guy, not the screamers and haters and fundamentalists of every kind. But most of the world doesn't want to go to war with the rest of the world,

At the most basic level, we'd all like to follow Jesus's five "love priorities":

Love God.  
Love your neighbor.  
Love your enemies.  
Love one another.  
Love yourself.

That would be quite a world, wouldn't it? That doesn't say all you chocolate lovers need to start eating vanilla or all Republicans need to vote Democratic, all Kansas City Royals fans need to cheer the Giants. What it does say is certain loves are greater than certain differences. My love for God should be greater than my disagreement over whomever you voted for.

Next Sunday we'll have our *Advent Devotional* ready to give you. For those who don't know, our *Advent Devotional* is probably the most popular ministry of our Deacons. Each year for six years, our Deacons have produced a "daily devotional" to take you from Thanksgiving into the new year. Each one is written by a church member, complete with a Scripture and a prayer. It will probably take two minutes to do one each day.

Not to brag, but this is hugely successful, wildly popular. This year we even upped our print run to 1,000 copies. And this year's is stunningly spectacular. Wait till you see it, wait till you read it.

It all begins in the summer. We began soliciting writers back in July. Meanwhile, my job is to develop a theme. I choose the Bible passages to

carry out the theme. So, imagine the scene. It's summer, vacation time, 95 degrees, everyone's at the beach, and I'm trying to focus on Christmas, the Holy Family, shepherds, and Wise Men, hoping for daily devotions you will want to read when it's snowing or it's 25 degrees out. Santa Claus and Christmas trees and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer are everywhere.

As I thought through that dichotomy, two other realities crashed my consciousness. One, you'd be getting your copy right after the election, and we already knew in July what a contentious election it would be. Two, the summer itself was chaotic and hostile and scary and divisive.

Here's summer 2014: it began with waves of child immigrants escaping violence in Central America, fleeing to the U.S. Then the God-haters of ISIS horrifying the world. Then Ebola scared the daylights out of everybody.

Against that backdrop of chaos and anticipating the divisiveness of the elections, I needed a theme for Advent, a theme that would carry us forward from Thanksgiving through Christmas, a theme that would start the new year on the right note.

I chose "Peace." *Peace*. Easy theme . . . tough sell. Our *Advent Devotional* is designed to get you ready for Christmas. Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ. Christ was born as "the Prince of Peace." The angels heralded Christ's birth with the promise "Peace on Earth." But what a mess we've made of it. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, he's a prince without a principality. If ever there was an unkept promise, it was Christmas Eve's angelic "Peace on Earth."

Once I decided on our Advent theme, I figured I'd write a poem about peace. I've written three books of poetry. I can write a poem about anything at the drop of a hat. I'm not saying they're any good, but I can write one easily enough. So I decided to write a poem about peace. I sat there at my little table at my favorite coffee shop in July, August, September, October . . . nothing.

The closest I came was this depressive little ditty:

*Peace  
Has lost its power,  
lost its way  
Peace  
is not the coinage of the day.*

So I gave up. Happily, our *Devotional* writers have NOT given up on Peace. Day after day, writing after writing, they push us to peace, they challenge

us, dare us, provoke us to peace. The Bible is full of peace, even when the reality is no peace. Peace is still the standard. Peace is the desired end. Peace is the plan, the goal, the hope.

Even Israel, the much-fought-over “promised land,” is birthed in peace. Nowadays it may be the land of rockets and terrorists and tunnels and checkpoints, but it began as the “land of milk and honey.” Of pomegranates and olive trees, of abundance and freedom. Even its ancient capital is Jerusalem: *salém, sálem, shalom*, a place of peace. That was the plan, no matter how it looks today.

So I gave all our *Advent Devotional* writers the plan, verse after verse about PEACE:

- “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” (Isaiah 55)
- “Proclaim peace to the nations.” (Zechariah 9:10)
- “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” “Peace be within you.” (Psalm 122)
- “The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:26)
- “Guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:79)
- “The fruit of the spirit is peace.” (Galatians 5:22)
- “Christ is our peace.” (Ephesians 2:14)
- “God has called us to live in peace.” (1 Corinthians 7:15)
- “The peace of God passes all understanding.” (Philippians 4:7)
- “Peacemakers sow in peace.” (James 3:18)
- “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” (Colossians 3:15)
- “For the kingdom of God is a matter of peace and joy.” (Romans 14:17)
- “Seek peace and pursue it.” (1 Peter 3:11)
- “[So] that in Christ you may have peace.” (John 16:33)

One verse I gave out three times because I wanted it repeated throughout the Advent season. I wanted us confronted by Jesus’s very clear statement: “Blessed are the peacemakers—*the peace MAKERS*—for THEY are the children of God.”

We’ve all heard a parent boast, “That’s my boy!” It’s meant as a boast. It’s usually said right after the child does something really good. I remember when Brigitta graduated from Bryn Mawr College last May. As each young woman went up on the stage to get her degree and her name was mentioned, pockets of people would shout and whoop and holler, celebrating their child. When Brigitta was playing field hockey at college, I cheered nicely for everybody, but when Brigitta made a great pass or a great stop or a great play, I shouted out her name for all to hear, letting everybody know, “That’s my girl!”

That's what Jesus was doing when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for *that's* my boy, *that's* my girl! Yeah, I love everybody. Sure, I'll die on the cross for everybody. But those peacemakers, they . . . well, they are the closest to me."

I hope there aren't too many kids in church today; if so, cover their ears for a moment. Parents aren't supposed to have favorites, right? Wrong! Parents have favorites. Alida and I have four children between us, and we joke every day, "Who's the 'good child' today?" It can vary from day to day, month to month, decade to decade. But we have favorites. Jesus had favorites, the "peacemakers."

Oh, we wish he'd pick us! "Blessed are the Protestants, for they are the children of God." Or, "Blessed are the Congregationalists" (or the "Christians)," anything that puts us on top. But he doesn't. "Blessed are the peacemakers . . . for they are the 'good child' today."

Today we had Grayson James's baptism. Grayson is blessed with a Hindu mom and a Christian dad, a perfect combination to become Greenfield Hill Congregationalists. The most famous Hindu of all time is Gandhi, for sure. Hinduism is 5,000 years old, and there are plenty of great Hindus. They've been famous in math, philosophy, engineering, medicine, and health. But nobody matches Gandhi, and Gandhi is famous for one thing: peace. Peace at any cost. Peace at any risk. He was actually very much attracted to Jesus, he loved Jesus, and at its most basic, he sought to be, in the language of our church, "Christlike." What makes Gandhi so special is he always looked for the best in others—other religions, other politics, other opponents.

He saw the five best things in Christianity, the five best things in the Bible, the five best things in Islam, the five best things in anyone. Most people can easily list the five worst things of anyone or anything we don't like. Test it right now, I'll bet most everybody here voted on Tuesday. You know the party you backed. Now, quickly, list the five best things about the party you didn't vote for. Right now, right off the top of your head, I'll bet you can't do it. We don't think that way. Gandhi did. Jesus did.

In our weekly Bible Study, we've just done the part where Jesus selects his disciples, and they were an unimpressive group: Peter, the belligerent, blustery, illiterate fisherman. Nathanael, the haughty, almost sarcastic bigot. Matthew, the traitorous, corrupt tax collector, an "enemy of the people."

You and I would look at all three and give Jesus five reasons NOT to pick them. Jesus looked at all three and saw five reasons TO pick them. And,

hey, if Jesus were here right now, he could look at any one of us and right off the top of his head list five reasons why he loves us.

Having read all of this year's devotions cover to cover, word for word, four times, I can tell you that they make a powerful argument for peace. Day after day, they call us to believe in peace, to aim for peace, to make peace. And the good news is that they put it all in our hands. They entrust peace to us. They dare us to be makers of peace in all our daily choices.

I'm going to close by reading one of the peace devotions. This one by Brendan Quinn, a young man who grew up in our church and now works in Washington, D.C., in politics. Maybe there's hope after all. Each year I give four writers a hymn verse instead of a Scripture, and his devotion is based on our final hymn, the old "peace" song, "Down By the Riverside":

"Down By the Riverside"  
Brendan Quinn

*I recently took a job in the D.C. area – working in political journalism, and I was delighted to discover that my office was only two blocks away from the Potomac River. If you've never been, the river snakes through the city, giving many locals particularly beautiful views. Occasionally on our lunch break, my co-workers and I will lay down our swords and shields (aka pens and paper) and relax down by the riverside – a nice break from the chaos that is D.C. politics. No matter what crazy political scandal has gotten us agitated in the morning, that time is for us.*

*As I write this, we are on the brink of the mid-term elections, and various candidates are launching attack after attack at each other – hoping to control the US Senate and various other offices across the country. They are fighting each other while in the pursuit of the same goal – to make our country the best it can be.*

*Of course, they don't see it that way, and if the partisan trolls that regularly attack our website are any indication, most of the country doesn't see it that way either. We have gotten so obsessed with this notion that the party we don't agree with is "ruining America" that we seem to be attacking them more so than the people who actually want*

*to destroy us. The “old hats” at my job who worked on the hill 20 or more years ago like to reminisce about the times Republicans and Democrats would go out together after every session, buy each other drinks and have a good time – and through this good time, they would find the power to compromise. Sadly, this today is a rare occasion. Sitting now by the Potomac, I wish the members of Congress could listen to this hymn, sit down together, and stop their war for a few hours. (Yes, picture Harry Reid and Rand Paul sitting side by side with their feet in the river, it’s hilarious). This is not going to happen, but change can start at the lowest level. I would like to encourage each of you to find someone with whom you disagree on something, and spend an afternoon with them. Discuss anything else. They’re a human being too, and they’re probably a good one.*

God, give us the strength not to forget but to forgive; because knowing each other’s faults and loving all the more is the way we truly find peace.

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Now, let’s have some fun and sing that hymn:

### **“Down By the Riverside”**

*Gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside  
Down by the riverside  
Down by the riverside  
Gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside  
Ain’t gonna study war no more.*

*I ain’t gonna study war no more,  
I ain’t gonna study war no more,  
Study war no more.  
I ain’t gonna study war no more,  
I ain’t gonna study war no more,  
Study war no more.*

*Gonna lay down my burden*

*Down by the riverside  
Down by the riverside  
Down by the riverside  
Gonna lay down my burden  
Down by the riverside  
Ain't gonna study war no more.*

*I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
Study war no more.  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
Study war no more.*