

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 7, 2016  
Sermon Title: Church As Soul  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Romans 12

Welcome to Week Two of shamelessly hawking my new book. Here's what I said last week: I want you to join me in standing up for Church as an idea, as a place, as a people. Because if we don't stand up for something we believe in, it won't matter; and if it doesn't matter, it will cease to be; and if it ceases to be, we will lose something that was important to us.

I am driven by my love for this Church and the Churches I've served in my life, but my love isn't enough. The very first Church I pastored up in Mechanicsville, N.Y., died just a few years ago. It dwindled and shriveled up and ceased to be. Great people, great history, great Church, and yet, it is gone.

The seminary in Philadelphia where I got my doctorate closed its doors, sold its property right there on the Main Line, and now operates out of an office building. The seminary where I trained to become a pastor just outside of Boston, the oldest seminary in America—beautiful, historic, legendary—it just last month announced it is closing, folding itself into Yale Divinity School. Not enough people wanting to be pastors, they said, not enough Churches. The evidence of decline and demise and weakness in Church is everywhere.

This, by the way, is not the focus of my book. My focus is good, better, best: a good Church doing better to be the best. Sounds like a mantra, doesn't it? A cliché, a marketing slogan, a branding: a good Church doing better to be our best. That's the kind of Church I believe in, that's why I love being here, that's why I believe in you, as Church.

David Bowie died a couple of weeks ago, a pop music star, an icon, artist, performer, actor; on the cutting edge of just about everything avant-garde, glam rock, fashion . . . and maybe faith. Two days before he died, Bowie released a new album accompanied by a video, "Lazarus," that begins with the words, "Look up here, I'm in heaven." In the video, Bowie is the Biblical Lazarus, wrapped in funeral cloths, a spectral presence, half-life, half-death,

one step in the grave, one step beyond, life emerging after life, touched by God.

After 69 years of an amazing life, a life of excess and experimentation and abundance and introspection and success and imagination, after all was said and done, with death just around the corner, Bowie takes us back to one of the important powerful stories in all the Bible, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus, surrounded by grief, consumed by his own brokenness, openly weeping, Jesus touches death and changes it to life.

Where Bowie got that, I don't know. Some little Church he went to as a child, a Gideon Bible left in his hotel room, a Google search for "life after death"? I don't know. But somehow he found his way back to the soul of Church.

The Soul of Church, the Church as Soul. That's my argument for why I'm asking you to keep Church alive. There is something intrinsically valuable, something innate, something inherently good for the common good that America needs, that towns and cities need, that we all need, that comes from Church. It isn't the architecture. This Church can be just as pretty, just as central to the Greenfield Hill Historic District if we were a museum. Look at the Grange up the road. It's still the Grange, even if it's defunct. People drive by and feel good that it's still there.

It isn't even for my own benefit that I am asking you to help keep Church alive. We could dwindle 10 percent a year for a long time and still look good. I'd be long dead by the time you'd have to put a "For Sale" sign on the lawn. So if it's not personal, not historic, not aesthetic, not tradition, what is the reason we should care? Why should I put so much effort into writing a book about Church? Why should I lean on you to get this book into the hands of people all over this town, all across America, and into the hands of pastors and Church leaders all over the world? Why care?

It's why I chose this title for my sermon: "Church As Soul." My whole book is about Church at its best, Church done right, what Church can be and should be when we are good, really, really good. And the answer is when we are good, when we are at our best, the Church is the soul of America. That's heady stuff. We are the embodiment of Christ, of everything Jesus did and stood for.

Our only reason for being is to be the best of God in a daily, personal, tangible way. Our religion is filled with lofty sayings, lofty ideals and ideas, all sorts of do-goodism and feel-goodism. Our job is to take all that off the shelf, off the printed page, off the altar, and make it live.

You will have noticed we haven't had a Scripture lesson yet. Instead, last week, and this week (and maybe a few more weeks), we have Scripture at the end of Church, the amazing words of Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 12, an exquisite description of Church at its best:

*Do what is right, be sincere, cling to what is good, overcome evil with good, do it cheerfully, don't be proud, live in harmony, practice hospitality, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer share with those in need, offer yourselves as living sacrifice, weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice.*

Wouldn't you like people like that for neighbors? Well . . . that's us. We're those neighbors. We are the soul of a community and a nation.

Last Saturday our state senator and Church member Tony Hwang hosted a fascinating forum at Sacred Heart University all about the impact of General Electric's moving to Boston. People near and dear to our Church spoke. Bill Jennings of Bridgeport Hospital, Eliot Brenner of the Child Guidance Center, Carla Miklos of Operation Hope, and Tony, and their message was powerful. One by one they outlined the generosity of GE as a corporation and as individuals; and they outlined the enormous challenge and their own joy in meeting that challenge of helping the truly needy, the most vulnerable, the most broken or hurting of our neighbors. The poor. The hungry. The lost. The homeless. The addicted. The sick. I sat among those speakers in awe, in awe at their determination, in awe of their strength, their wisdom.

I wondered what the heck I was doing there among the speakers, what two cents I could possibly bring to the table. The answer was simple: a little Church, or Soul. Amid the stories of human need, of budget crises, of public policy, and societal changes, I was invited as merely a Church pastor. Thanks to Tony, I was allowed to bring Church to a time of community challenge. I was allowed to bring the best of who we are and what we stand for. I praised all the blessings that GE people have been right here in our own little Church and then offered visions of hope and encouragement for our town.

Visions that emerge naturally from Church at its best, at our best. We are not doom-and-gloom-sayers. We are not hand-wringers and whiners. We are not finger-pointers. At our best, we are people who believe in resurrection, restoration, reconciliation; at our best, we believe in tomorrow wholeheartedly, while living today faithfully.

Alida and I had so much fun this week. We sat down with Mia Benjamin, a young woman who grew up in our Church. Mia is getting ready to become a Church pastor. She was in town interviewing with Yale Divinity School. She's been working in a Church near Boston, and we sat together talking about Church life. The whole time, she had this wonderful, wonderful smile, full of joy at the prospect of living life immersed in Church. "It started here," she told us, "it all started right here." And she loves the people in her Boston Church and all the work she gets to do. She loves it!

The week before, we met with Jocelyn Kitson, who also grew up in our Church, and her husband, Shea. They were just called to serve two Churches in Waterbury, and they are so excited!

And our two Yale women, Rachel and Jamilah: sit with either of them for just five minutes, and you'll get high just talking with them. They are so energized by their faith and their love for Church, it's electric! There is something in Church, when it's done right, when it's good. It is Soul.

When the book was getting done, several Church families helped bring it to reality, and with your help it will end up in a lot of laps, read by people who want Church done right.

One of my "angels" sent me a video link that echoed what I'm saying today. It was a YouTube video by a Harvard Business School professor, and he shared a quick story. He said he was talking with a Marxist economist from China studying in the U.S. on a Fulbright Scholarship. Reflecting on his time in the U.S., the young communist said that he was shocked at how important religion is in America to the functioning of democracy. It seemed to him that democracy worked in America because it took root in our Churches; that the guiding principles of democracy were forged in the experiences of Church. In other words, we were the Soul of America. What will happen, the professor wonders, when Churches disappear? When our spiritual foundation crumbles?

That's an idealized view of Church, isn't it? Darn right! We're supposed to be idealized! You want reality, drive on Rt. 95. You want ideals, come to Church. During our visit with Mia, she was talking about her ministry with people who have no Church background; her number-one task, she said, is to convince them "We're not freaky!"

That's true. The world of religion, Churches, pastors, members, there's a lot out there that's "freaky," scary, worrisome, negative, ugly, mean, dangerous. That would make a good book, Church at its worst; Church done bad; Church, as it shouldn't be. Go see "Spotlight." That's not my book. My book is about you and us, at our best.

It actually is that simple. In fact, Jesus put it simply. He looked at his first Church, and he said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the leaven in the bread." As I mentioned last week, Church gets messed up when we lose our focus. We are the *salt* of the earth, but sometimes Church tries to be the whole earth. We are the *leaven* in the bread, but some Churches act as though they are the whole loaf. Jesus say, "be salt," "be leaven," be that which makes a difference from within.

Have you been to the new Greenfield Hill Market at the bottom of the hill? Interesting analogy for Church. Look at what they did. They took the same old building, the same footprint, the same place, and created a fresh world inside. They didn't become a megastore, they didn't go high tech. It's not

loaded with trends and fads. So far, it's just good people offering good stuff. The people are nice; they seem to genuinely like you. I think I've seen half our Church down there, and every one of you was always smiling, even when the lines were long. They figured out what they're supposed to be, and they're doing it to the best of their ability. That's Church.

We're not power brokers. We're not kingmakers. We're not voting blocks. We're not the nation's economic engine. But when we're at our best, we will always be wanted at the table. We bring Soul.

## Scriptural Benediction

### Romans 12

### The Church's One Foundation

Deacon: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

Congregation: ***Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering,***

***persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.***

***Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***

And now, let's join together to sing again our Church's own hymn, written by Timothy Dwight, "I Love Your Church, O God"

*I love your Church, O, God,  
On earth your blest abode  
the people our Redeemer saved  
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your Church, O God.  
Whose walls before you stand,  
dear as the apple of your eye,  
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall;  
in love my prayers ascend;  
to serve your Church my toils be given,  
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys  
I prize your people's ways:  
the sweet communion, solemn vows,  
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,  
to Zion shall be given  
the brightest glories earth can yield,  
and brighter bliss of heaven.*