

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: May 15, 2016
Sermon Title: An All-Purpose Church
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture ***A Quick Take: Pentecost Scripture Litany***

Jr. Deacon: Wait for the God promised . . . in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5)

Congregation: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Jr. Deacon: When Pentecost came, suddenly a sound like the blowing of a strong wind came from heaven and filled the whole house . . . they saw what seemed like tongue of fire that came to rest on each of them. (Acts 2:1-3)

Congregation: All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. (Acts 2:4)

Jr. Deacon: In Jerusalem were God-fearing Jews from every nation, and when they heard this sound, a great crowd came together, amazed because each one heard the disciple speaking in their own language. (Acts 2:5-6)

Congregation: Then Peter stood up and addressed the crowd, telling them about Jesus of Nazareth, sent by God as shown by miracles, wonders, and signs. Jesus was nailed to the cross. (Acts 2:14, 22-23)

Jr. Deacon: But God freed him from the agony of death and raised Jesus to life, exalted him and now His Holy Spirit is poured out. This is what you now see and hear. (Acts 2:32-33)

Congregation: Therefore God made Jesus both Lord and Christ . . . therefore, repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. (Acts 2:36, 38)

Jr. Deacon: Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to the number of believers that day. (Acts 2:41)

TOGETHER: They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miracles were done. All the believers were together and had everything in common, giving to anyone according to their need. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Wow! It's hard to know what to say after that Scripture . . . that is the birthday of the Christian Church, plain and simple. Whatever happened on Good Friday when Jesus was crucified, whatever happened on Easter when he was raised from the dead, whatever happened on Pentecost when the whole thing took off like a rocket, whatever happened, a few people believed it all, believed in Jesus, his life, his teachings, his meaning. A few people believed it all, and they convinced others, who convinced others, who convinced others.

And before you know it, a crazy, illogical, idealistic, wonderfully naïve idea became a movement, then a phenomenon, then a Church, then a religion. And before you know it, 300 nice reasonable, educated, intelligent, sophisticated people are sitting in Greenfield Hill Church taking it all to heart.

Now I know what "conventional wisdom" says about the Church. We are passé, irrelevant, dwindling, dying, decrepit, outmoded. We live in a "post-Christian," "post-Church" age. The *New York Post* on Thursday had a three-page spread on the wonderful home decorations done by folks turning old Churches and synagogues into apartments and condos. Yes, "conventional wisdom" has the Church one foot in the grave, at least here in the Northeast, especially New England.

Some years ago, I was meeting with a well-known foundation trying to get funds for Habitat for Humanity to build houses with the poor across the country. They liked us, but they said they had other, more urgent priorities. They wanted to use their funds to bring Christ to New England, where he

wasn't known, the toughest place for the Gospel in all of America, they told me, "the toughest nut to crack." When I was in seminary, the Southern Baptists targeted New England for missionary work because, they told us, we were so lacking in Christian Churches. And you may remember a year ago when the new Fairfield Baptist Church started up, they made brochures and videos that featured our Church as their example of dead and dying Churches and photos of our Church members as their example of the lost people of Fairfield and why they needed money to start their Church. That's the "conventional wisdom" of modern Western Christianity: dying, dead, decrepit, depressed, empty, hopeless, done.

Yet here we are, the descendants and inheritors of that first Pentecost, when folks were so excited, they hung out together, ate together, prayed together, did baptisms together, and tackled the world together.

I was thinking about this, reflecting on various events these last few weeks of our Church life. Last weekend was our Dogwood Festival, an extravaganza of volunteers, good will, generosity, and lots of fun, even with almost endless rain. But in the meantime, a lot of good was accomplished. By noon on Sunday, the sun broke through, and the crowds filled the festival from one end to the other, people shopping and buying, meeting and greeting, hugs all around, stories being swapped.

For Alida and me, Dogwood Sunday afternoon begins with our "Blessing of the Animals" on the front steps of the Church after the 10:30 service. In the past we've had cats, turtles, snakes, hamsters, but this year it was all dogs. We begin with Scripture and a mini-message, and then a long litany filled with animal sounds. Yes, animal sounds.

You may remember from our Pentecost Litany that one evidence of the Holy Spirit was "speaking in tongues," the Disciples started talking in ways that made it possible for everyone, no matter where they came from, to understand what Peter and the Disciples were saying. Well, when we bless the animals, we speak the language of animals, with woof-woof, chirp-chirp, moo-moo, meow, and even horse whinnies. Silly? Too silly? Beneath our dignity? Not if you're a dog lover or pet lover or animal lover. People come here with their dogs and their families, some with tears in their eyes, telling us of sickness, injury, weakness; telling us of pleasure, joy, friendship, as we kneel down, bless each one by name, kiss them.

By mid-afternoon, our Church grounds were packed when the Pivot House Ministries Gospel choir began to sing. Right there on our front steps, 32 men, black, white, Hispanic, straight from the streets, broken by alcohol and drug abuse, scarred by life's failures. Families lost. Careers ended. Health

wasted. And now, by the grace of God, *by the Grace of God*, they stood on the front steps of our Church singing and praising God, telling their stories in words and song; prancing, dancing, shouting, testifying.

People gathered on the lawn. The sounds could be heard all across the greens. Folks walked by and stopped and stayed, took it all in. The men sang of God's power, Jesus's love, shout-singing in "call-and-response" fashion, "Jesus came . . . for the drug addict; Jesus came . . . for the alcoholic." A young man stepped forward to tell his story, the abuse he suffered as a child, the abuse he inflicted on himself, the abuse he did to others, he confessed it all, to us, at our Dogwood Festival, with people eating hamburgers, ice cream, buying baked goods, smelling the flowers, picking up treasures at Kate's Corner. Pentecost—happening on our front lawn, sponsored by our dead, dying, decrepit, empty, done-for Church.

On Tuesday morning I came to the sanctuary. A group of Warde High School history students were on their way. They come each year to learn a little about our Protestant Christianity and what we believe and what we do in this little dying, dead, decrepit Church, to help the world. "Social action," they call it.

I saw a young man taking photos of the dogwood trees, the steeple, and when I walked in here, he followed me, taking pictures of the cross, the baptismal font, the pews. Turns out he was one of our Dogwood vendors. He had spent all three days here last weekend in the cold, in the rain, in the sunshine.

During those three days, just outside the ASP tent, he'd met a lot of our Church people. You know what he told me? "All your people are so nice to do all this, not even for themselves, and your teenagers are amazing, the best teenagers I ever met." At that point the high school students walked in, and Alida and I began our presentation.

In one day, they visit a synagogue, a mosque, a Catholic Church, and us. Our job is to explain (are you ready?) Protestantism, Congregationalism, Christianity, the Cross, Holy Communion, our architecture; and what we think about the Civil Rights movement, gay marriage, war, terrorism, and other religions, with Q and A. All in 55 minutes. And we do it.

We begin by having them sing what we call the "Greenfield Hill Church hymn," written by Timothy Dwight ("I Love Thy Church, O, God") because, believe me, *nobody* knows who Timothy Dwight was. And then we give them junk food and juice while we tackle all their questions.

Above all, they want to know about "social action." What "action" do we take to make an impact on society? So I tell them about our Field of Flags, and we read from the Bible, what the prophets say about justice, what Jesus says about compassion. Then I showed them our Sunday bulletin from last week, with all those special announcements:

On page 6, our Adult Ed Board's "salons," the next one about caring for our earth, conservation, and climate.

On page 7, our new ministry with refugees and immigrants, working with sister Churches to bring God's love personally to people lost in ways we can't imagine.

On page 8, Bob King's run, "500 for the Fallen," to help kids whose soldier dad or mom was killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Bob was a platoon sergeant in Iraq; three of his friends were killed. He's determined to help, and we help him help.

And I told them about our Pivot House young addict who loved Jesus back to a new life.

That's just one week's "social action." Then we closed with our "Blessing of the Animals" litany, two pastors and a bunch of high school kids, thanking God with woof-woof, chirp-chirp, moo-moo, meow, and horse whinnies. And among those students were three of our own Church kids, veterans of Appalachia and St. George's Soup Kitchen, all from a *not* so dying, *not* so dead or decrepit, a long way from a done Church.

You know, my tongue-in-cheek references to "dead, dying, decrepit" Churches and that conventional wisdom that Church is *passé*, what I'm hinting at as part of the problem is self-image. Lots of people think if a Church isn't shouting, condemning, or a megachurch, it's not a real Church. So we let that image of Church, that definition, make the rest of us feel inferior, as though we don't count. Well, we're not mega, we don't shout or condemn. But we *are* a Pentecost Church.

Remember, on that first Pentecost, 1,983 years ago, there was *no* Christianity, there was *no* Church. There was just a bunch of people sitting around, drinking coffee, eating pie, talking about this amazing Jesus who refused to be gone, over, done, who taught them a new way of being. And that little bunch of people began to imagine what it would be like to save the world, one St. George's hungry person at a time, one Pivot House alcoholic at a time, one Appalachian family at a time, one Indian FOCI street child at a time, one lonely immigrant family at a time, one cancer patient at a time, or

even one of our Church kids at a time, one baby being baptized at a time, one of any of us at a time.

That's a Pentecost Church 1,983 years ago; or today—food, fellowship, prayer, and changing lives, one at a time.

Let's stand and sing Hymn No. 259, "Spirit of the Living God."

*Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me;
Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the living God,
move among us all;
make us one in heart and mind,
make us one in love;
humble, caring, selfless, sharing.
Spirit of the living God,
fill our lives with love.*