

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 3, 2016
Sermon Title: Heretics
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Our Litany for America

Deacon: "Get thee to a far country," God said to Abraham. And they made a covenant, each to be a blessing to the other.

People: ***Our ancestors, or even we ourselves, left some place far away to come to this far country. This was our Promised Land, our Providence, our new Canaan.***

Deacon: Joshua said to Israel as they came to the Promised Land, "Choose this day whom those shalt serve. As for me and my family, we shall serve the Lord."

People: ***Dare we make the same choice? With flag held high and patriot's fervor, here in the Promised Land, dare we choose to serve God above all? We dare.***

Deacon: "If my people will humble themselves and pray, and seek me, and turn from wickedness, I will hear them and heal their land." (Chronicles 7:14)

People: ***Holy God, we do call upon your name in times of joy and difficulty. We call upon your name to guide us, protect us, use us. Heal us from all that divides us, from all that wounds us.***

All: ***"May God thy gold refine," we always sing in "America the Beautiful." In our pride we choose to be humble, knowing our need to improve. We are not afraid of failure, but we refuse to keep failing. Yes, Lord, refine our gold. Take us at our best and our worst, and make us better.***

The Bible says, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Everybody loves that verse. It's perfect vengeance; it seems rational, makes sense, makes us feel good. *BUT!* (You knew a "but" was coming, didn't you?) But, Jesus actually

quotes that verse, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and rips it right out of the Bible, rolls it up into a little ball, and tosses it away with disgust. He actually refutes the Bible. He contradicts Scripture. And before you know it, he's arrested and crucified as a heretic, a blasphemer, a man with bad ideas, a danger to society, an underminer of religion, a heretic.

I'm going to go nuts if I have to worry for the next four months that every sermon I preach is going to be heard through the filter of presidential politics. I am about to preach a sermon on heretics, upenders, game-changers, risk-takers; people who dare to confront the status quo. And every person here has probably already decided whom I'm talking about, when, of course, I'm talking about Jesus, America, and even you, if you dare.

Let's start with today's art. Beginning five weeks ago, and right through the summer, we are bringing art into our sanctuary. In this lovely New England Church, with our white walls and natural light, it is a great setting for fine art, and we have already had some very fine art. We call it "Faith Art," art that expresses faith. We had Jane Ellis's evocative Church and serene Christmas Nativity; Wendy Cooke's allegorical "Quest" for heaven; Diana Rose Smith's powerful autobiographical birth narrative; and Ray Dirks's "Two Faces of God."

Today, you see these two pieces up here, but they're small, so look in your bulletin at the photos. Genie Bourne lends us the one of the man with the dunce cap, clearly a heretic. The other is a miniature version of Rodin's idea of Creation, Adam and Eve, emerging from the "Hand of God." A heretic and creation? For July 4th Sunday? Bear with me.

When I was young, I had a simplistic view of heretics. They were the folks who were wrong, troublemakers with bad ideas, dangerous. No wonder they were burned at the stake! They didn't believe right, they didn't think right, they didn't do right. As I grew up, the heretics began to look more and more like me!

Protestants started off as heretics. We are the "protesters." That's how we got our name, "protest-ants," Protestants. And many of those who protested were declared heretics. They were wrong, troublemakers, dangerous, with bad ideas; they needed to be stopped. Burned at the stake, hanged from the gallows. And Protestants have their own heretics, people in our own midst we declared to be wrong and dangerous and who must be eliminated: Mennonites, Quakers, Baptists, Pentecostals. The Pilgrims and Puritans. Us! We were heretics in our own religion! They were all on the wrong side of history at one point, the wrong side of power, and they paid the price.

I once met some young men down in Virginia. They had just been kicked out of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's college, kicked out for attending the wrong Church for a Sunday evening service. Is there some irony there? A Christian college, called "Liberty," of all things, kicks out some kids for attending the wrong Church! Who are the heretics in that story?

On another occasion I was in a Christian bookstore. I saw some books on "cults" and "sects." In Christian circles, those are both code words for "beware, watch out, bad people, bad ideas." Lo and behold, our family Church was listed! Our family comes from a little denomination called "Advent Christians." We never troubled anybody. We believe in the Bible. We believe in peace. We believe that Jesus is coming again. And yet, we are listed as a cult, a sect, worthy of suspicion, suspected of heresy! In ancient times, they would have put dunce caps on our heads and burned us at the stake.

The "heretic" painting is actually titled "The Clown," but as soon as I saw it, I knew he was a heretic. When heretics were burned at the stake, they were paraded through the town square, usually wearing that kind of dunce cap, often with a sign around their necks detailing their heresies. When Alida and I were in Florence in April, we went to an ancient monastery where Savonarola had been a monk. As a monk, he demanded changes in Christianity. Some folks didn't like that. They called his ideas "heresies." So they put a dunce cap on his head and killed him as a heretic. A heresy is a belief that runs contrary to what is accepted, the status quo, what those in charge have deemed to be right. People in charge don't like challenges to being in charge, whether it's religion or government or society or business.

Such behavior gets you labeled traitor, disloyal, unpatriotic, subversive, rebel, protester, heretic. Nowadays, in civil society, such a person might be fired, fined, be unpopular, kicked out, insulted on social media. In uncivil society and olden times, holding an unpopular thought, speaking an unaccepted truth could get you killed, labeled a heretic, burned at the stake, killed for your beliefs.

On Thursday I was up at Yale walking through the old campus quad and stood in front of another work of art, a statue, also of a heretic: Nathan Hale. The world into which Nathan Hale was born was an ordered, settled world. England ruled the world, the king ruled England. Connecticut and the Colonies were English, lock, stock, and barrel. Nathan Hale was from Connecticut, so he was English, period, end of discussion. Any other way of thinking was contrary, disloyal rebellious, traitorous, a heresy.

Young Nathan Hale, 21 years old, just graduated from Yale, hoping to be a teacher. He wanted America to be free. He was contrary, disloyal, rebellious, traitorous, a heretic. So the British hanged him, with his final words resounding through history, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Pure heresy at the time. Or we might say courageous, visionary, patriotic, sacrificial, heroic.

Our other "Faith Art" piece is called "Hand of God." This is a copy that Dave Lyons bought for his wife Anne in Paris, and one can barely imagine the original. Here you can see the art of creation, Genesis Chapter 1 come alive, life emerging from the primordial mud, Adam and Eve, our first man and woman, imagined by God, brought into being by God, created by God, soon to be standing up, looking around, and taking ownership of the earth. Rodin captures the energy of the moment, the miracle, the power, almost the explosion of life upon the earth.

You know, I'm probably the only person in America who doesn't like fireworks. My newspaperman is a Muslim immigrant. When I saw him yesterday, he was all excited. He had gone to the Westport July 4th holiday fireworks. He loved it. "This is so America!" he exulted. Later in the day, I looked again at this sculpture, and I got it: reaction is explosive, whether it is the original founding of America with "the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air"; or Rodin's Adam and Eve bursting forth from the "Hand of God"; or the Christian Church exploding on the scene on Pentecost, amidst a cacophony of sound, convincing 3,000 people to be baptized and to believe in Christ; or it's the first cry of a newborn baby taking its place in the world. Creation is like that: explosive, powerful, energetic, even while it is upsetting, disturbing, changing. Even heretical.

By now everyone knows I've written this new book, *Church*, all about Church. What it can be, should be, needs to be. A lot of it is my story, but a lot of it comes from my father. My father spent 65 years as a church pastor, and his father, 60 years before him as a pastor; two of my uncles, 50-plus years as pastors, so I learned a lot from them. I listened. I watched. And I remember my father telling me, "A really good pastor needs to be a bit of a heretic, and a really good Church needs a bit of a heretic as its pastor."

My father, a proud child of the heresy called America, a proud child of the heresy called Advent Christians, a proud child of the heresy called the Pilgrims, he was that "pretty good pastor with a bit of heretic in him."

As America enters its 241st year, as our Church nears its 300th year, let's not spend all our time enshrining the past, glorifying the good old days, or

worshipping yesterday. Save some energy to allow the "Hand of God" to push us forth to new creations with a "bit of heretic" in us. Like Jesus.

Let's stand and sing Hymn No. 721, "My Country Tis of Thee."

*My country, 'tis of thee,
sweet land of liberty,
of thee I sing:
land where my *fathers died,
land of the pilgrims' pride,
from every mountainside
let freedom ring.*

*My native country, thee,
land of the noble free,
thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
thy woods and templed hills;
my heart with rapture thrills
like that above.*

*Let music swell the breeze,
and ring from all the trees
sweet freedom's song.
Let mortal tongues awake;
let all that breathe partake;
let rocks their silence break,
the sound prolong.*

*Our *fathers' God, to thee,
author of liberty,
to thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright
with freedom's holy light;
protect us by thy might,
great God, our King.*