

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 10, 2016
Sermon Title: Christians and Pizza
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: John 15: 9-17

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

A word about today's sermon. Sometime last November I wrote half a sermon called "Christians and Pizza." It never got preached because of the Paris terrorist attack, so I put it aside for another day. For eight months, this little pile of paper sat on my desk with a Post-it note, "Pizza Sermon."

Well, I thought on Monday, this would be a good week for a fairly simple sermon, a "fluff" sermon, Alida calls it, something bright and airy. It's been 95 degrees most of the week, it's early summer. Most of the Church has been away in Appalachia, they'll be too tired to come to Church anyway. Everybody's in a gentle, mellow mood. Today would be a good Sunday for a "fluff" sermon.

Then all heck broke loose. A young black man selling CDs in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was wrestled to the ground by two policemen. One sat on him,

and then he was killed. Two days later, a popular Montessori School worker in St. Paul, Minnesota, Garrison Keillor country, gets stopped by the police and killed inside his car. Each one videotaped. We have all watched it, over and over again, in living color.

And then, on Thursday night, a rage-filled, hate-filled Afghan War army veteran systematically executed five policemen who had been overseeing a peaceful protest in Dallas.

So, what to do? Well, frankly, like many of you I'm numb. We sent out a pastoral letter on Friday. We're used to that, which is a horrible thing to say, isn't it? *We're used to that*. Columbine, 9/11, Newtown, Orlando. We send out a pastoral letter. We hold a memorial service. We read the 23rd Psalm. We light candles. We softly hum a hymn.

Yes, we know the routine, and that's another horrible word, isn't it? *Routine*. A routine cop killing. Routine killing of a young black man. Routine Islamic terrorism. Routine gun violence. Routine war veteran suicide. Routine opioid drug overdose. And, yes, routine moments of silence when tragedy strikes.

When I started our pastoral letter to you on Friday, I started with the 23rd Psalm, "The Valley of the Shadow of Death." But I had used that just three weeks ago for Orlando. Then I switched to Isaiah's "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people." We used that with Newtown. I ended up using "Is there any word from the Lord?" from the prophet Jeremiah. Good question. I believe the answer is yes, but I was too numb, too sad, to do it today. Next Sunday, Alida and I will bring you "the Word of the Lord," for these times, our worship, our sermon, our prayer, our hymn. We'll give you our "Prescription for America," our "word from the Lord." Today, however, you're stuck with the "Pizza Sermon."

"Christians and Pizza." Now, there's a sermon title for you. I gave up trying to have catchy sermon titles years ago after I preached a sermon called "Streaking for Christ." Streaking, running naked through college campuses, was a huge fad back in the late '60s and early '70s, and I managed to find an obscure reference to the prophet Isaiah going around naked for three years to make a point (Isaiah 20). Hence the title. Today, I have pizza in the title, although I can find no reference in the Bible to tomato pie or even a slice. But I did find on the Internet a lot of the 25 best pizzas in America, and seven are in Connecticut, two right here in Fairfield: Pepe's and Colony.

I thought of pizza in connection with Christians because pizza is a staple food, staple and stable. It is a basic comfort food that retains its hold on people, no matter how they grow up, develop, change, or mature.

A young Democrat who becomes an old Republican doesn't give up on pizza. A 17-year-old pizza lover who goes off to college doesn't give up on pizza. A meat eater who becomes a vegetarian doesn't give up on pizza. And yet, despite its popularity, pizza has been willing to change with the times: gluten-free pizza, thin crust pizza, pizza with salad on top, with kale, with mashed potatoes, even vegan pizza with no cheese at all.

Meanwhile, Christians are in decline. Everywhere. Across the demographics, Atheism is on the increase. The fastest-growing group in the world of religion in America is the "Nones," as in "none of the above." More and more Americans when asked their religious preference choose "none of the above." Why? How have we lost our "pride of place"? How have we lost our "mojo"? How have we lost our "market share"?

We once dominated the landscape. Our steeples, our Churches, our people, our values, our principles, our policies, our leaders. We once dominated the landscape, physically and intellectually, legally, and spiritually. Notice I used the word "dominated" twice, and maybe that was part of the problem. We Christians often exercised our leadership by domination. When we said, "No business on Sunday," we had the Blue Laws. When we said, "No booze," we had Prohibition. We told people whom to vote for, what to vote for. We used our clout for clout.

We Congregationalists, when we first came to America as Pilgrims and later as Puritans, we made life miserable for anyone who wasn't a Congregationalist! That's how we ended up with Rhode Island and the Hutchinson River Parkway and Thomas Jefferson's separation of church and state. Rhode Island was founded by Roger Williams, who fled the Congregationalists of Massachusetts for his life, seeking religious freedom. Anne Hutchinson was kicked out of Massachusetts for being too independent in her religious life. Thomas Jefferson promised the Baptists of Danbury that they wouldn't have to worry about the government interfering in their Church.

Before I came to Greenfield Hill, I was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, an old, historic church like ours. The First Baptist Church of Pittsfield got started by folks who resented having to pay taxes (yes, taxes) to support the Congregationalists in Pittsfield!

Think back to your love of pizza. What would your reaction be if the government mandated that you eat pizza twice a week? Or mandated that you could go only to a certain pizzeria? I think our rebellion would be quick. We'd start eating other food just to make a point.

My point is Christians have this wonderful message, this stunning message, this extraordinary message, so amazing, so distinctive, that when people heard it, they loved it, they grabbed it. The message is profoundly simple: *God loves you*. The truth is Jesus did radical surgery on religion, cutting it to the bone, cutting out the excess, cutting away the decay, the rot. Without Jesus, the message of religion is often this: God loves you . . . BUT . . . God loves you . . . IF . . . God loves you . . . MAYBE.

Jesus got rid of the exceptions, the ifs, ands, and buts, and leaves us with "God loves you." Listen to today's Scripture again. This is Jesus talking, trying to prepare the disciples to be the first Christians, and he says, "As God has loved me, so I love you. Now remain in my love." Fourteen words, three of them "love," two as a verb, one as a noun. And Jesus is just getting warmed up. "If you wish to obey me, love. My command is this: love . . . just as I have loved. I've told you this so that you will be brow-beaten, controlled, burdened, ordered, intimidated." No, it doesn't say that at all! Jesus says, "I've told you this so that your joy may be complete . . . I call you friends . . . [so] love," period. (John 15:9-17) Thirty more words, five more "loves." Sounds as though he meant it.

Now, let's face it, Jesus was a naïve idealist. A good guy and all that, just not much for organization, so we Christians took over Christianity from Christ because we knew better. We took his basic words and improved on them. We kept, "This is my command," but we substituted, "This is my command: No Roger Williams freedom, no Anne Hutchinson enthusiasm, no Thomas Jefferson Baptists, no dancing, no United Nations, no public school education, no homosexuality, no evolution. No civil rights, no equal rights, no lipstick, no life insurance, no, no, no, no, and no."

Thank goodness Christians saved Christianity from Christ! Imagine if we'd stuck to Jesus's original silly words: "Love. Love one another. Love your neighbor. Love the stranger. Love your enemies. Love yourself. Love God. Let your joy be complete."

You must wonder what the genesis of a sermon is. Sometimes it's a Bible verse or story. Sometimes it's something happening in the world around us. For this sermon it is a *New York Times* story, a lovely, fun, encouraging story about the dramatic resurgence of story time at public libraries. Story time! With books. In libraries. What a stupid idea! Everybody knows books

are dead, certainly real books, like those with pages and covers and bindings. And kids have no attention span. Plus, this generation and their parents' generation are all tech-addicts. If it's not on an iPhone, iPad, an app, forget about it. It's over. Librarians are over. Reading aloud is over. Parents and kids and books are over. *Except*. Librarians in New York City have lines out the door for story times; people get turned away, many take reservations. Story time attendance is up 28 percent. Libraries are adding readings, hours, days, even librarians. (Hu, Winnie. "Long Line at the Library? It's Story Time Again!" *The New York Times* 1 Nov. 2015: 1. Print.)

Now, let me see if I have this right. Libraries are repositories for books. Books need readers. Readers need to know how to read. The next generation of readers is made up of kids. So, these silly libraries full of books are bringing families in to read books, see books, love books. Wow! What a concept. Imagine sticking to your guns, to your core, to your guiding principles.

The first really big televangelist was Rex Humbard. A down-home, folksy, kindly country music guitar-playing preacher. He was the "king of the hill" for a lot of years on television, operating out of his "Cathedral of Tomorrow," in Columbus, Ohio. I liked old Rex Humbard. But his eyes got too big for his stomach. He bought a resort in Michigan and a girdle factory in Brooklyn.

Now, I'd love to have a girdle factory in Brooklyn, but you wouldn't want a girdle made by me. I'd love my own resort in Michigan, but you wouldn't want to stay at a resort run by me. Girdles and resorts are not my strengths. They weren't Rex Humbard's either, and he got so in debt, so overextended, the Securities and Exchange Commission came after him. Old Rex forgot he had all the gold and silver he needed as a preacher. He had that "old-time religion": God loves you. That's what Christians have to offer. Pizzerias have pizza. Libraries have books. Christians have love. Or, we've got nothing.

You're going to hear plenty of other prescriptions to our world's ills:

Rage: Enacting revenge will save us.

Prejudice: Removing those who aren't like us will save us.

Religion: Making others believe as we do will save us.

Guns: Weapons in the classroom will save us.

War: Boots on the ground will save us.

Politics: The right candidate will save us.

Christ says love will save us.

We've got some choices to make, don't we? Next week, we'll look at our "Prescription for America." For today, there's no better way to end our worship than to have Wendy sing our faith, "How Great Thou Art."

*O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed;*

Refrain:

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander,
I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze; [Refrain]*

*But when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin; [Refrain]*

*When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation,
and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration
and there proclaim, "My God, how great thou art!"
[Refrain]*