

Greenfield Hill Congregational

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Date: September 11, 2016
Sermon Title: I HATE CHURCH
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Litany for Strength Forward

Leader: When you come to worship, singing, teaching, or preaching all of this must be done for the strengthening of the Church.

(1 Corinthians 14:26)

People: Love God with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength; and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

(Deuteronomy 6:5, Mark 12:30)

Leader: God is our strength, our refuge, our shield, our song.

(Psalm 46:1; 28:7; 118:14)

People: Hope in the Lord and your strength will be renewed. You will soar like eagles; you will run and not be weary.

(Isaiah 40:31)

Leader: Do not fear for God is with you. Do not be dismayed for God will strengthen you and help you.

(Isaiah 41:10)

People: Through faith God's people conquered Kingdoms, defeated enemies, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, escaped the sword, gained what was promised when, through faith, weakness was turned to strength.

(Hebrews 11:33-34)

Leader: For Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:10)

People: I know that God can do all things; no plan of God can be thwarted

(Job 42:2)

Leader: Jesus said, some things may be impossible for people, but with God all things are possible.

(Matthew 19:26)

People: I pray out of God's glorious riches God will strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

(Colossians 1:11)

Unison: May Our Lord Jesus Christ and God who loves us and whose grace gives us eternal encouragement and hope, may God strengthen you in every good deed and word.

P.S. for some of us! Be disciplined . . . Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. (Hebrews 12:7,12)

I've been shamelessly hustling my book since March (perhaps you've noticed!). So did you notice today's bulletin cover with a subtle but significant change? My book is titled *Church: One Pilgrim's Progress*. I'm the Pilgrim. It's my story about what I think Church can be. For today we crossed me out of the title. It's *Church: **Your** Pilgrim's Progress*. You are the Pilgrim. Our Church is here for *your* progress.

Writing a book is fun. I actually enjoy the process. I *hate* editing and correcting, but fortunately, Alida loves editing. You put a red pen and a black Magic Marker in her hand, and watch out!

Last summer, we did much of the final editing in Woodstock, Vermont. Norman Rockwell could not have painted a more idyllic New England town. We sat down in a lovely French café on a lovely Vermont summer day, and I watched Alida slash and burn her way through my book, crossing out, moving this story around, taking scissors to whole pages, and sweetly asking, "What on earth does *this* mean?" "No, you can't say that!" "This is all wrong!" Well, Alida did her magic and, of course, she was right.

People seem to love the book. We've had over 1,200 sold. If writing is fun, hearing from readers is even more fun: letters, emails, post cards, phone calls, visits. One person brought copies for all the leaders of his Church. Another friend goes to a small Church, and every Sunday they have a guest preacher, usually someone in seminary, and she gives each one a copy to encourage them. Another friend said, "This book will save my Church."

Yes, praise is a wonderful thing. But I've had a lot tougher responses too. A dear friend, a longtime churchman, someone who helped out several Churches in his life, wrote to tell me he'd given up on Church. One Sunday he decided it just wasn't worth it. He walked away. No more Church.

Another person was more blunt: "I don't believe anymore." And last, I told a pastor about my book, and he looked me right in the eye and said, "I hate Church." *I hate Church*. Now, of course, I know pastors who never should have become pastors. Pastors who have lousy Churches, dysfunctional, mean, angry Churches. But this guy had had a great career. He was much loved, much admired. He was good at it. Yet, there he stood, looking back on his life saying, "I hate Church." Those conversations shook me. Those are good people. They love God, they served the Church, they tried their hardest

to be faithful Christians. One walked away. One stopped believing. One hates Church.

My job today is to get you ready, get you excited for the new Church year. We have a lot happening. You want fun, we have it. You want a great Sunday School, we have it. You want an amazing youth ministry, we have it. You want a Church that touches people, takes care of people, makes a difference, we have it. You want worship that aims to bring you and God and daily life really close, we have it. You want a Church with ideas, passion, energy, vision, we have it. You want a Church that believes you can be good citizens of America, good citizens of the world, good citizens of the Kingdom of God all at once, we have it.

I could brag on our Church all morning and still not be done, all true. But it's also true that in our world, in this age, in our society, people are fed up to here with religion; Church isn't at the center of anything anymore; too much of Christianity, like much of society, is divided, weakened, silly, irrelevant. Once upon a time, we dominated the landscape, we drove the conversation, people flocked to us. And the Christian Church took all that interest, all that allegiance, all that trust, all that power, if you will, and we squandered it. Century by century, decade by decade, age by age. We stood on the wrong side of history. We stood on the wrong side of justice. We stood on the wrong side of people. Some of the worst of all evils were rooted in religion: the Holocaust, slavery, the Inquisition. Too often religion preferred to be mean-spirited, finger-wagging.

Alida and I went to Broadway to see a fascinating play called "Christians." The entire 90-minute play takes place on the altar area of a huge mega-church. The founding senior pastor sits up there on a throne, his adoring wife, his energetic young associate pastor, the chair of the deacons, all up there, side by side, and a lively choir sits behind them all, overseen by a brightly backlit cross. It is a picture of holiness, of success, of harmony. Until one day, God comes to the senior pastor, and God tells the preacher in no uncertain terms, "There is no hell. No hellfire. No eternal torment. No divine torture. Stop talking about it. Stop teaching it, stop preaching it. Stop it." *O.K.*, thinks the preacher. *It's God's religion. If God doesn't want a hell, there is no hell.*

So Sunday morning the preacher tells his congregation hell is over, it's not going to be part of their Church anymore. And the preacher is not worried at all. This is his Church. He started it, he built it; the people are his people. They love him, they'll trust him, believe him, follow him.

Over the next 90 minutes, it all falls apart. His associate pastor breaks from him. He leaves to start his own Church, with hell, and people go with him. One by one the choir members get up and walk out. His wife leaves. The deacons leave. They all want their hell.

In a troubling, heart-wrenching final scene, the old pastor and his young associate have one final conversation. The young man explains why he needs hell. It's the core of all he believes. He likes the fear that holds people together. He needs the certainty that comes with knowing that certain people are going to hell. It's the ultimate ego boost.

Such thinking kept Christianity in control for a long time, and now it is fundamentalist Islam trying the same old tools: violence, fear, oppression, inquisition, control.

Well, enough of this negativity. I only want to assure you that I'm fully aware of the problems Christianity has caused itself. We Christians have wasted time blaming everyone: pop culture, atheists, public schools, liberals, the media.

Forget blaming; let's concentrate on what's good, "*what's noble,*" the Bible says, "*Whatever is pure, lovely, excellent, think on these things.*" (Philippians 4:8) That's our strength. And that's why our Church motto this year is "From Strength to Strength" from Psalm 84: "*How lovely is your dwelling place O, Lord. My soul yearns for your Church, my heart and flesh cry out for the living God! Blessed are those who dwell in your Church. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, O, God. For they go, we go, from strength to strength.*" That's a love letter to Church, Church at its best, Church as it can be.

Look at the bulletin cover again, my book cover. That's from an original painting. A family dropped by the office a couple of years ago, said they had found the painting cleaning out a relative's house, and they gave it to us. I used it for the cover because it's such a lovely, romantic, idealized vision of our Church. It's us at our best, a Church worthy of our "*soul yearning for it,*" our "*heart crying out for it,*" a sacred place that takes us "from strength to strength." That's what we're here for.

I met with a couple recently who are getting married here soon. I told them the Church had just been freshly painted, clearing away rotted wood, reviving this old house to fresh splendor. "Just for our wedding!" they smiled. Yes, I thought, just for your wedding. That's how we want every Sunday to feel, that our Church is perfect just for you. We aim to be that idealized Church every day

As you know, we lose a lot of our Church people every year. Our young people go off to college and then start business careers elsewhere; or business people take new jobs elsewhere; our older people retire elsewhere. We hear from many of them and almost always have a bittersweet conversation. We'll say, "Have you found a Church yet?" And they'll say, "We've tried, but we can't find anything like Greenfield Hill Church."

That makes me sad, and it makes me proud. But I've finally stopped worrying about the "sad" part. We can't fix religion worldwide. We can't fix Christianity nationwide. But we can be darned sure about Church life within these four walls. We can be a Church that goes "from strength to strength," we can pray with such fervor, we can love with such ardor, we can teach with such empathy, we can help with such kindness, that our whole town will be blessed and at least some of the Earth will be healed. We can be that ideal Church on the cover where your "Pilgrim's Progress" takes place.

And so . . . today is 9/11 again, 15 years after a wound beyond measure, 15 years of war, 15 years of terror, 15 years of loss. But it has also been 15 years of rebuilding, 15 years of healing, 15 years of growing. Babies who were in the womb that day, whose dads never came home, those babies are in high school. Widows and widowers have remarried. Their children are in college, and beyond. Take a look at the front page of today's *Connecticut Post*. It's all about those kids. Good things have happened for those who yearned for good things to happen. "From strength to strength."

Many of you know Rachel Bauman, who worked with us in ministry for a couple of years. She's back with us this year. A graduate of Ludlowe High School and a recent Bates college graduate, Rachel has lived, like all of our young people, in the shadow of 9/11. I asked her to share some thoughts, and as Rachel always does, she went to the world of literature and the world of faith to find her words. She quotes Einstein and Rumi and Martin Luther, Oliver Sacks and the Psalms and the Book of Revelation, before guiding us to prayer. Let me close with her thoughts.

She begins with a number: "2,983 victims. To never forget, we have to remember," Rumi teaches us, "Only from the heart can you touch the sky."

Einstein said, "The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything."

Jonathan Safran Foer, in his book about 9/11, wrote, "In bed that night I invented a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York, and would connect to the reservoir. Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go to the same place, and in the morning the

weatherman could report if the water level of the Reservoir of Tears had gone up or down, and you could know if New York is in heavy boots.”

The Bible says, *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4)

Oliver Sacks, days after 9/11, wrote: “On my morning bike ride to Battery Park, I heard music as I approached the tip of Manhattan, and then saw and joined a silent crowd who sat gazing out to sea and listening to a young man playing Bach’s “Chaconne in D” on his violin. When the music ended and the crowd quietly dispersed, it was clear that the music had brought them some profound consolation, in a way that no words could ever have done.”

The Bible says, *“I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”* (Psalm 121:1-2)

“What does a 9/11 prayer look like?” Rachel asks. “What words of hope can we use after a tragedy that is so unholy, so crippling? I am compelled to pray in silence. To listen to people’s stories, to reach out my hand to yours, and to know that there is so much I do not understand. What I would like to do is to place my feet, my heart, and my body right where hope does not seem possible . . . I am talking about the hope that crosses boundaries. The hope that says that peace does exist even if we cannot see it or imagine it.”

“How do we find this hope in one another when the entire world is at war . . . and people do not seem to care? We have to be honest with one another. We have to show up when we are needed. To show up when we are not even asked. This might look different for everyone. It might mean staying five minutes longer than you usually do at Church to introduce yourself to someone new. It might mean engaging with someone who has a different set of beliefs from you. It means finding hope in one another—something this Church is good at.”

Rachel quotes Sanobar Khan: “This life has been a landscape of pain, and still, flowers bloom in it,” which is why Martin Luther could say, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

So, Rachel concludes, “Let us plant the seeds for one another. In the noises that surround us, through the noises that terrify us, we can continue planting seeds. We need more peacemakers. We need more people to see

the light in one another . . . Let us fall silent in prayer, but shouting in hope . . .”

That’s a church that refuses to be beaten down by anything. We choose to be a Church “from strength to strength.”