

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 13, 2016  
Sermon Title: The Day After  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

## **1 Corinthians 15:1-8**

*Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.*

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

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Do you have any post-election sense of humor? No? All right, then I'll skip the next page of my sermon; some good stuff there, even one story Alida has forbidden me to tell. Maybe in two years.

It must have been 15 years ago, I was driving on the Merritt Parkway, the car in a front of me had a bumper sticker: "Charlton Heston Is My President." It was funny, it was pointed . . . but it wasn't true. Every election produces bumper stickers that declare, "Don't Blame Me! I Voted for \_\_\_\_\_." And you fill in the blank every four years with whoever did not win.

This week we've already seen protest marches with signs, "He's Not My President." Again, it's all a little pointed, a little humor, but, bottom-line, it doesn't matter. Somebody won, somebody didn't, and if we are like everywhere else in America, in this Church we have folks who are happy and

folks who aren't. It's like the World Series. A lot of happy folks in Chicago, not so many in Cleveland. That's what happens when you keep score, and everybody, believe me, keeps score.

My son started playing organized baseball when he was 6, and they didn't keep score. Official league policy for that age: no score. When the game was over, every parent, every kid knew the exact score. They knew who won, who didn't. That's life.

I learned this lesson in 1975. I traveled across Africa, then to Rome. Walking around Rome, I came to the Coliseum, historic, famous, precious, but covered with anti-American graffiti, specifically anti-Henry Kissinger graffiti. And everywhere I went, I was held accountable for American foreign policy. Nixon was my president, like it or not, and Nixon wasn't even president in 1975! But to the world, Nixon and I were joined at the hip. Today, we are joined at the hip with Donald Trump. Now what?

Our Church life, our worship life is pretty informal, free form. I like it like that. But from time to time, I've had the privilege of preaching in Catholic and Episcopal Churches, and they have prayer books, missals, *The Book of Common Prayer*. Everything is in there, same prayers and readings year after year.

There is a familiarity, a routine to it all, that people like. In there is a prayer for those who are in authority: your senator, your governor, your bishop, your pope, your president. But there are no names. There just a blank space, and you fill in the blank with whoever holds that position. So for eight years, in those Churches, people have been praying, "Lord, we pray for our president [fill in the blank], Barack Obama." But on Sunday, January 22, it will be, "We pray for our president [fill in the blank], Donald Trump." It's not partisan. It's not an endorsement. It's a statement of reality. This man is our president. So, God, get in his face, get in his ear, get in his head. And in the words of King Solomon, give him "a wise and discerning heart." That should be our prayer every Sunday for every leader.

Meanwhile, what do we do? And I mean that in a Christlike way, not as folks who just won or lost, but as folks who take Christ and faith and this Church seriously. What do we do?

I started thinking about other famous victories and defeats from the Bible and what folks did afterward. David killed Goliath. David, the inexperienced underdog, defeated the battle-tested Goliath. In the aftermath, there was a great slaughter of the losers. David's fame went through the roof, jealousy

and infighting broke out, years of what should have been prosperity and national progress were squandered.

By the way, an interesting book is *David and Goliath* by Malcolm Gladwell, sort of a business book that describes how successful people have turned seeming disadvantages into advantages, just as David defeated Goliath with a slingshot. So we might want to follow the example of David up to his defeat of Goliath, but there were lots of missteps afterward.

O.K., here's another. Israel defeated Jericho in the most famous battle in the Bible. At that point Israel wasn't even a country, just a large crowd of escaped slaves from Egypt trying to make a country somewhere. They came to Jericho, a large walled, militarized, organized city, a formidable opponent. You know the song, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumblin' down." Which is what happened under the most extraordinary circumstances. God told the Israelites to march around Jericho, blowing trumpets, playing tambourines, the priests and the soldiers and the citizens in sort of a festive, party-atmosphere parade. They were told to do this for seven days, and on the seventh day do it seven times, and when they blew the trumpets on the seventh day, "the walls came a-tumblin' down," sure enough.

God gave them a magnificent, miraculous victory without firing a shot. Then they killed every man, woman, child, and animal in the city. Every one, every thing. That was their aftermath, their after-victory policy. That was their way to build a national identity, civic pride, patriotism. And, of course, they blamed God for it, but maybe it was just selfish arrogance, shortsighted and wrong.

For most of history, victory aftermath was pretty ugly. We hear the words "rape and pillage" linked to historic victories, and "looting, revenge, settling scores, taking slaves, ethnic cleansing, genocide." Those all began as victory laps, victory celebrations.

Then I thought about Jesus and his victory over death. In Christian theology, the central story is that God faced off against death, one on one, mano a mano, the greatest conflict of all time. And God won. Everything else that's good about Christianity comes from that astounding victory. Our commitment to justice. Our desire to help others. Our total devotion to love. All this is embedded in us by Jesus's victory. An unabashed victory.

We've started a new Bible Study this week, the two short letters by St. Peter. And he's really straightforward. Everything he stands for, everything

he's telling them, everything he's done with his life, everything he wants the Church to be, it all starts with the Resurrection, Jesus's victory.

After this week's election, we were all inundated with thoughts, opinions; our inboxes were filled, weren't they? The first one I got was a profound quote from St. Peter—profound, peaceful, hopeful, correct. But even that important teaching emanates from one great hope: Jesus's victory. So what did Jesus do in the aftermath of victory? Maybe there is a lesson there. We'll begin with what he didn't do. There was no whining. No recrimination. No threats. No court suits. No revenge. He got to work.

I was reading an article yesterday by a columnist who was actually happy with the election and mocking the protesters, but at the same time she gave some good advice: "Don't agonize, organize." That's wise for all of life's crises. "Don't agonize, organize." And that's what Jesus did. He didn't go after the Romans who had killed him. He didn't go after the religious leaders who had set him up. He didn't go after the public who had scorned him. He didn't go after the folks who had turned against him, denied him, abandoned him, didn't show up for him. He got to work. He used his time and his energy and his passion to reassure, to forgive, to reconcile, to carefully, person by person, create a lasting organization: us. He didn't get sidetracked.

Being so close to New York, many of us New Yorkers, by trade or tradition, we have our memories of September 11<sup>th</sup>. One that is forgotten is coming to Broadway in February, "Come From Away," a musical about the people of Gander, Newfoundland. Maybe you remember. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, our airports were closed, and 38 international flights were forced to land in little Gander, Newfoundland, 6,700 passengers descending on a little town in rural Canada. Imagine it. Nobody knows what's going on, the future of the world felt uncertain, and 6,700 scared, frustrated, lonely strangers are dropped in the lap of little Gander. So what happened?

For the people of Gander, it was no big deal. They took the strangers in, opened their hearts and homes and kitchens. They cooked and fed and sat and listened, they made room. "No big deal," a town policeman said, "Some people dropped in for a bucket-o'-tea and a biccy," said Oz Fudge, a local constable then and now, using a localism for a biscuit. "What's the big deal?" (Paulson, Michael. "A 9/11 Parable, Resurrected in Newfoundland." *The New York Times* 1 Nov. 2016: C1. Print.)

If there is one lesson from this election, it is a big one, a sad one: we don't know one another. Large swaths of this country don't know one another. The Clinton supporters would be hard-pressed to explain the approximately 60

million Americans who voted for Trump. And the Trump supporters would be hard-pressed to explain the approximately 60 million Americans who voted for Clinton. Too often we talk past one another, we walk past one another, and we look past one another. We don't know, listen, or understand one another. We all act as though 6,700 total strangers just moved into our little town. We don't know who they are, where they came from, what they're like, but by golly, they're here. The people of Gander didn't cry wolf or didn't cry uncle. Instead they got to know their new neighbors.

A young friend came to see me last month. She'd been away for a while, busy with other things—good things, important things. Now she's thinking of politics as a career. She wants to make a difference. She wants to put her faith to work by running for office. But first, she told me, first, she's going to take a year or two to crisscross this country, to get to know Americans, to listen.

This is getting long, I know that, but so what, this is a holiday weekend, we've got the time, and this is important, so I'm going on just a bit more.

I learned something about this Church years ago. Nobody likes to see Alida angry. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, people feel awful and want to fix it right away. People care about her. They don't want her to be angry.

In America right now, a lot of people are angry, hurting. In a rather astounding paradox, it is angry, hurting people who fueled the victory. And it is angry, hurting people who feel the loss. And for the most part, nobody cares about the other side. We need to treat everybody as if they were Alida. After all, many of the most angry are our relatives, our friends, neighbors, coworkers, Church members.

As good fortune would have it, the day after the election, I was one of the speakers at an interfaith Thanksgiving service. When I told someone I was doing this Thanksgiving service, they asked, "Is it Thanksgiving for Mr. Trump's election, or Thanksgiving that the election is over?"

I said, "No, Thanksgiving. You know, Pilgrims and turkey and gratitude? An interfaith Thanksgiving service. And our theme was "Peace." There was a priest, a rabbi, an imam, and I. Those other three clergy were amazing. I could preach another hour on what they said, but I'll close with this. The rabbi told about the phrase Jewish people use every Sabbath. It's part of the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer. "*Oseh shalom bimromav*". "May the one who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us."

The rabbi taught us that when you say that hopeful expression of peace, you should take three steps back.

*"Oseh shalom bimromav"*. Three steps back  
*"Oseh shalom bimromav"*. Three steps back

Everybody asks, "Why take three steps back?" The classic explanation is that you are taking leave of God, and you shouldn't turn your back on God, so back up three steps in respect. But the rabbi offered another explanation. "You're talking to God. You're hoping for peace. So you back up to make room for others. There is no peace if you don't make room for others."

There was a time when people loved to discuss, to debate, to argue. It was an art form. It was a family tradition. It was the fertilizer of America. I think the Internet ruined that. Now we can snipe at one another from afar. We can hide behind aliases and anonymity and made-up screen names. We don't have to know one another.

God help us, there's another election in two years, a big one in four years. Can't we use that time getting to know the other half, whichever half that might be for you?

When Jesus was resurrected, he sought out two people who were running away from him. They knew him, but they had given up. Then he sought out his disciples, the ones who abandoned him, they voted their fears. Then he met up with Thomas, who doubted him. And last but not least, he sat down and broke bread with Peter—big, bad, bold, brash Peter, who had failed him in every way. Sure, it was uncomfortable, it was awkward, it was embarrassing. But Jesus held Peter's gaze, looked into his soul until all the fears, all the disgust, all the personal history melted away, replaced by love.