

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: What Else? *Church: One Pilgrim's Progress*
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Ephesians 2:19

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So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

Most of you know this story. I was president of Habitat for Humanity for many years, but sadly, I had to confront the founder about his sexual mistreatment of women. He fired me. I was cast adrift, blackballed for two years. Churches wouldn't touch me with a 10-foot pole, 107 rejections as I looked for a job. It was quite a comedown. Before that, I was hot stuff in Church circles, guest preaching all over America and in a dozen countries, being interviewed for Church jobs—big Churches, fancy Churches, lots of inducements.

One Church offered a limo, one had an indoor track, one had a daily radio show, one had front-row seats for all sports games at the major university in town, one offered a personal reader: someone who would read books for me and provide summaries.

It was heady stuff. And all of a sudden, no Church would talk to me. At my lowest point, I drove from rural Georgia, where I was living at the time, to Queens, N.Y., where I grew up, and where my father had been a pastor back in the '50s and '60s. I parked my car on the corner of 89th Ave. and 104th St., got out, and for two hours I walked my old neighborhood. I started and ended at the little Church I grew up in, Pilgrim Congregational Church. A little white stucco Church, it might have sat 150 people in the sanctuary. My father made \$6,000 a year, tops; no secretary, no staff. And Saturday nights he and I went into the furnace room where there was an old hand-cranked mimeograph machine, and we would print the Sunday bulletins one at a time. That Church was old-school. So for those two hours I walked the streets of Richmond Hill, Queens—every block, every front stoop, every playground, a memory from

those old Church days. And I suddenly realized that all I wanted was one more crack at doing Church right.

I wasn't looking for anything fancy; I wasn't looking for perks or prestige, or a stepping-stone to something better. I just wanted to a chance to do Church the old-fashioned way: simple, basic, a place that feels like a family, that runs like a country store, where kids run wild and old folks smile; where the Bible isn't mocked and neither is the neighbor nor the stranger; where everybody pitches in to run the Church fair and the Sunday School and the soup kitchen. And so, I ended up here. Sometimes I think I should write Habitat a thank-you note because this is heaven. That was hell. I never thought I'd make it back to heaven.

By the way, this heaven talk isn't a stretch. The Christian Church 2,000 years ago began as a direct response to the Resurrection. Once Jesus was raised from the dead, all the other theological stuff took on deeper meaning. Life after death didn't seem like "pie in the sky." Saying the Lord's Prayer, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen," and "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth *as it is in heaven*," started to seem real.

And other things Jesus said, "My father's house is a mansion in which there are many rooms . . . I go now to prepare a place for you . . . he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live . . . for I am the Resurrection and the Life," all that took on extra significance.

Religions had been pointing at this in all sorts of ways, but all of a sudden, here was living proof: death defeated, the grave set aside, a very alive Jesus making his presence known "in convincing ways," the Bible says, "*in convincing ways*."

That's the genesis of Church. People who believed in this started thinking, "Hey, we need to organize ourselves, we need to spread this story, we need to gather little groups of us, to keep our candle burning bright, to encourage one another to reach out effectively to others." That's how Church started. That's all Church means, you know. Church means "a gathering," like a town meeting.

You know what this street is called? Meeting House Lane. This is the Meeting House. People built this house so we could meet to hear the amazing story of God at work through Jesus Christ. That's what brought Timothy Dwight here in 1780; that's what brought Alida here almost 30 years ago, that's what brought me here 20 years ago. I'm guessing that's what brought you here. A little slice of heaven right here on this hill.

It really was because of you that I wrote my book. Now, I'm not trying to butter you up. I am a realist. My family members have been Church pastors since 1920. Among us we have almost 400 years of Church experience. We know full well the follies and the frailties and the failures of Churches: scandals, boredom, irrelevance, intolerance, and plenty more. But I wrote my book because right here, you folks, this Church made me want to tell about Church at its best. What we can be when we do it right.

If you remember the cover of my book, it's a lovely painting of our Church, done back in the '50s. We picked it very carefully. It is both accurate and yet idealized, almost an Impressionist painting. You feel what we are at our best.

You get sick, we visit you; you get old, we won't forget you; if you're a kid, this is your playground; if you're a teenager, this is your safe space; when you get in trouble, we have your back; when you need a friend, count on us; you lose your way or your faith or your job or your loved one, you're not lost here; if life is good for you, no one could be prouder of you; if life is not so good, no one could be prouder of you; if you have questions, we have time for you; if you have time, we have work for you. That's Church done right.

What did I learn after one year of this book? I could say, "People loved it," but I realize I hear only from those people who did love it. I'm not famous. I'm not Stephen King. He gets emails after a new book saying, "It was O.K., but it was not as good as *Children of the Corn!*"

I don't attract critics or critiques. I'll give you a hint though; I'll bet my next book does! But not this one, people really liked it.

I can summarize all the comments into two categories: one, the Church I describe is what they want Church to be. I captured people's best memories of Church and people's best hopes. Two, a lot of folks told me why they'd given up on Church. The great quotes I put there in the front of the bulletin for you to see (a little bragging is O.K., right?). But the sad stories also really hit me. I told you about a friend of mine who asked what my new book was about. I said, "Church," and he exploded. "I HATE Church," he told me, "I *hate* Church." All that after a very successful career as a pastor.

Several dear friends from Maine to Florida, lifelong Christians, longtime Church volunteers, wrote to tell me how they lost their faith in God, in religion, in Church. Several others, from Michigan to Arizona, wrote to tell me about heartbreak in their Churches: splits, useless divisions, needless fights, power plays, egos. But even for them, *maybe especially for them*, I wrote the book to give hope.

So, maybe the book is doing its job. For those who love Church, who still believe in it, it says, "You're right, it's all worth it, keep at it!" For those who've left Church, given up on it, it says, "Remember when it was good, remember what it can be . . . and maybe, try us."

Art McCain gave me a book to read, and I just finished it, the autobiography of William Barclay, one of the great Biblical scholars of the 20th century. He concluded his life story saying, "I love the Church," but he admits it has mostly failed. He tells the story of a woman going to Church one Sunday morning in a little historic, picturesque stone Church in rural England. She sat, listened, repeated the prayers, sang the hymns, but the fact of the matter was it was dead. She writes, "The pity is, it was all so harmless . . . nothing about it reminds one of the young man from Galilee who strode the countryside and talked with the people with burning words." There was no hint of what once made Church worth living for. (Barclay, William. *A Spiritual Autobiography*. Richmond, Texas: Eerdmans, 1975. p. 118)

My wife gave me an Amazon Echo for Christmas. It's like a woman in a can, named Alexa. All I have to do is call her name, and she plays any music I want. I love classical music, mostly cello music, so I've been listening nonstop to Yo-yo Ma and Joshua Bell, but last week I got an idea and said, "Alexa, play the music of Pablo Casals." Holy cow! All of a sudden there was cello music straight from heaven!

You know how I love baseball. I watch the popular teams and popular players, but from time to time some sports show will play a grainy old video of Ted Williams swinging a bat for the Boston Red Sox, and I remember. *That* was baseball. *That* was how God created a man to hit a ball. Two years ago Alida and I went to Italy for the first time. We flew into Venice, hopped on one of those Venetian Grand Canal boat taxis, got off in Piazza San Marco, settled in, went out to dinner, ordered spaghetti. I took one bite and entered euphoria. "Oh, my," I said to Alida, "that's what spaghetti is supposed to taste like!" I tell those stories simply to remind us there are times in life when we experience something as good as it gets, the way it is supposed to be.

You heard me mention the upcoming funerals for Donna Fox and Sam Hawley. You add to those Florence Vermeulen's a couple of weeks ago. That's three folks with about 175 years of life in this Church. They gave to us in so many ways. They gave us money, sure; nothing wrong with that. They gave sweat, ideas, leadership. They gave us their kids and grandkids. They gave us time, humor, grace, friendship. In a word, love. They gave us 175 years of love. You can't top that.

Donna Fox's son, Craig, has become a friend. He lives out in Oregon, where he's an artist, sort of off the grid. He gave me this one painting, two canvases.

He painted each canvas at the same time, one with his left hand, one with his right hand. And no matter how you place them, left to right, right to left, top to bottom, it still works. The scene is sort of a storm, a hint of danger; if you put the panels together one way, you feel the danger. You put the panels together another way, you see this sunlit path leading to a little country Church up on a hill.

You may have noticed that this sermon is somewhat short on Scripture today, which is O.K. for one Sunday, I hope! After all, the purpose of Church is to *live* Scripture, not just to talk about it, and we are living the Scripture of faith and love. Indeed, love is at the absolute heart of our Church, and this is becoming clearer and clearer as that message spreads.

At our Church Bible Study we are using a book by Mother Teresa, and the chapter for this week lifted love above all else. It's the beating heart, the absolute center, the true soul of Christ's Church. This very week I started reading two new books: one by Father Tomáš Halík, the Roman Catholic priest from Prague whom I quote so much in my book. The other is by N. T. Wright, one of evangelical Christianity's foremost leaders. And they are both coming to the same heartbeat, that love is the essence of God, the meaning of Christ, the purpose of Church.

That's the liberal end of Catholicism, the evangelical end of Protestantism, and the missionary end of Christianity, all agreeing with us at Greenfield Hill Church: God is love. We keep close to that, and this Church will always be strong. I guess what I'm asking of you is to help get the story out.

We conclude our service today by singing a hymn written by Rev. Timothy Dwight, who was pastor of this Church in the late 1700s and went on to become president of Yale University, "I Love Your Church, O God," No. 274:

*I love your Church, O, God,
On earth your blest abode
the people our Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your church, O God.
Whose walls before you stand,
dear as the apple of your eye,
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall;
in love my prayers ascend;
to serve your church my toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys
I prize your people's ways:
the sweet communion, solemn vows,
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,
to Zion shall be given
the brightest glories earth can yield,
and brighter bliss of heaven.*