

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 15, 2017  
Sermon Title: The Protestant Reformation - Part I  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Faith Litany

## Our Faith Litany

**Leader:** Therefore, since we are justified by faith WE HAVE PEACE  
WITH GOD through Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

Congregation: *Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what  
we do not see.* (Hebrews 11:1)

**Leader:** The only thing that counts is faith. (Galatians 5:6)  
Lord, increase our faith! (Luke 17:5)

Congregation: *(But) faith without works is dead.* (James 2:7)

**Leader:** Through Christ everyone who believes is justified from  
everything you could not be justified from by the law.  
(Acts 13:39)

Congregation: *Christ was raised to life (from the dead) for our justification*  
(Romans 5:25)  
*. . . we are justified freely by his grace.* (Romans 3:24)

**ALL:** Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what  
we do not see. (Repeat) (Hebrews 11:1)

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A word about today's sermon: It always makes you nervous when I say this because first, it means it is a long sermon so I'm trying to make it feel shorter by splitting it up, and second, it must be complicated if I have to explain it. So here goes:

Two thousand seventeen is the 500th anniversary of the official start of the Protestant Reformation. Up until then, Christianity had two parts: the Western

Church and the Eastern Church. The Western Church was headquartered in Rome so, of course, it's the *Roman* Catholic Church. The word "catholic" means "universal." So it's the universal Church, headquartered in Rome. Roman Catholic. The Eastern Church we call the "Orthodox Church," pretty much the same as Roman Catholic, but they're not under the Pope, and they're identified by nation: the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, or Egypt's Coptic Church.

But in 1517, from Italy all the way up to Finland and everywhere in between, folks were Roman Catholic. They had disagreements from time to time, here and there, but they came together for the most part.

Until, in October 1517, a Catholic priest named Martin Luther published his "95 Theses." Remember, Luther was a Catholic priest, an Augustinian monk, actually; a professor of theology, an up-and-comer in Catholic leadership. And, well, he had some questions, so he sat and wrote "95 Theses," 95 points of discussion that he wanted the Catholic Church, *his* Catholic Church, to discuss. He walked to the front door of all Saints Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed his list of "95 Theses" to the door, sent a copy to his boss, the bishop, and then all heck broke loose.

Luther pushed. The pope pushed back. Luther's followers and the pope's followers slaughtered one another for way longer than the 30 Years' War. Before you know it, a huge wall is built between Protestants and Catholics. Even when the killing died down, we still consigned each other to hell; you got disinherited and excommunicated for marrying on the wrong side.

Two hundred eight years after Luther, some folks started this little Church up on this hill. We are a child of the protesters whose protests led to being called "protest-ants: Protestants." Yet, the truth is, this old Church transcends those old labels of division. We have long since, to quote St. Paul, long since "broken down the dividing wall of hostility." We don't think in terms of Protestant or Catholic or Congregational or denomination. Our goal is to be as Christlike as we can, day by day. And when we fall short, do it better the next day.

We are our own little petri dish of religion, carrying out our own little experiment to live the life and teachings of Jesus. I long ago gave up on trying to fix Christianity or Protestantism or Congregationalism. Instead, right here on this little corner atop Greenfield Hill, we try to be the best doggone Church we can be. Where we come from, religion-wise, how we got here, religion-wise, what we call ourselves, religion-wise, are not important.

You know what one of my happiest moments has been our Church? Last spring, a young girl and her mom came up to me after Church all excited, gave me big

hug, all excited . . . the girl had just had her First Holy Communion at a Catholic Church nearby. I love that! A girl in our Sunday School, with parents deeply, deeply involved in our Church life, was so excited to have made her First Communion. And they were *here*, celebrating.

Let me close this pre-sermon sermon by looking at the Apostles' Creed. I'll bet most of you, Catholic or Protestant, grew up reciting it; some of you know it by heart. Churches have been saying it for 1,700 years, the earliest attempt to define the basic beliefs of Christianity.

What's interesting for today is the final paragraph. It says, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," O.K., of course; and "the communion of saints," that's nice; and "the forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," terrific, that's what we're all after! So far, so good, but stuck in there is one more little phrase, "I believe in the holy catholic church," *the holy catholic church*.

Protestants and Catholics both say it, but they don't always include each other as being in it. And not just Protestants and Catholics! Protestants are divided among themselves every which way from Sunday. In my life I've had far more Protestants tell me I'm unsaved, un-Biblical, un-Christian, and are far more likely to deny me Communion, to ridicule my Church, to refuse to work with me. But in this place, in this room, up on top of this hill, right here, you and I, we can proudly say, "We believe in the holy catholic church."

Let's read The Apostles' Creed together. It's in your hymnbook on page 359.

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,*

*the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

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I'm guessing it was the mid-1960s, and our little house in Queens with all abustle. My mother was busy cleaning and baking, my father and I carried folding chairs from our Church to our living room. After dinner, the doorbell began to ring, and one after another, in walked our Catholic neighbors from up and down the block, mixed in with folks from our little Protestant Church on the corner, where my father was the pastor. With Swedish brownies on their laps and a glass of ginger ale, they sat in a big circle talking about God and Jesus and the Bible and Church. It was part of a movement called "Living Room Dialogues," a way to help Protestants and Catholics get over centuries of animosity, even bloodshed, by talking about the very thing that divided them: religion.

Trust me on this. This was revolutionary! Protestants and Catholics sitting together, talking religion, my father and the local priest, side by side. Do any of you remember how we used to talk about each other, Protestants and Catholics? In those days, on the playgrounds and in the streets, we each condemned the other to hell and worse on good authority. "Some nun told us," "some preacher told us," "some hate-filled relative told us." We couldn't even peek into the other's Church. "Stick to your kind," on pain of who knew what! "Don't marry one of them!" "Birds of a feather flock together."

Protestants and Catholics at each other's throats. The Jews, forget about it—they weren't even in the conversation! We were too busy hating each other's Churches. Plus, we'd never heard of Muslims, and we couldn't spell Buddhist if we'd had a dictionary.

Why all that hostility? Nobody knew! It was all some big historical mystery, but we knew enough to condemn each other. And now, all of a sudden, there were people from our own Protestant Church and all my Catholic neighbors snacking in my living room, yukking it up, having a grand old time like . . . like . . . friends . . . like neighbors, as though they were all Christians, one big happy family!

Yep, 453 years after the Protestant Reformation; 412 years after the 30 Years' War killed 8 million people in Europe, Christians killing Christians over who's a Christian; after all that time and bloodshed, Protestants and Catholics were in my living room, talking Church. Forty years later, my widowed father dated a retired nun from that same Catholic parish that sent those neighbors to our living room. We've come a long way.

So, what's worth thinking about today in our unique little Church? This Church, with lots of Catholics, lots of Protestants, Jews, Hindus, folks who grew up one or the other or are still linked to one or both, or folks who left it all behind, don't care about labels or never had any . . . What's the Reformation to us?

We'll probably never get to the point of one universal Church, all in agreement. For one thing, Protestants are just too ornery to join hands with everybody, including me. I'm past the point of wanting to join anything. What's that old joke? "I wouldn't join a club that would let in someone in like me!"

Plus, we all have our standards that don't allow universal acceptance. I remember the first time I saw a chocolate bagel. I was in Brooklyn in a bagel shop, and I could not help myself. I blurted out to the baker, "That's not a bagel!" A couple of years ago, we had a Church party down at Penfield. We hired a pizza truck. They made a mashed potato pizza, and again, I couldn't stop myself. I said, "That's not a pizza! It may be a casserole, but it is not pizza," which is all silly and narrow minded. But we don't need that in Christianity anymore. We don't need to look at one another's flavors and tastes and blurt out, "That's not Christian." The next Reformation needs to reform what's been torn apart. So . . . for some background:

Every year, Fairfield Warde High School brings a group of history class students to our Church on a day-long journey to five religious places. When they come here, we're supposed to explain Protestantism, Congregationalism, Christianity, and our views on civil rights, war, terrorism, women clergy, and homosexuality in one hour.

So I tell them Judaism is like our grandparent; and they passed down a lot of their ideas to Catholicism, which is like our parent. And Protestants, well, we are like the rebellious teenagers that want to go off and do their own thing because their parents and grandparents can't possibly know anything.

Now, I could preach a year's worth of sermons on all the lousy, bad, stupid things done in the name of every religion. Every religion is made up of humans, and we humans can make a mess out of most anything. And out of every mess, in every religion, there will always be some people who want to fix things, change things, protest or reform things. Protest. Reform. Protest-ant reform-ation. Protestant Reformation.

Let me state the obvious that most people don't realize. Most "reformation" comes from within. It always starts with people inside who want change. Start with Judaism. Jesus was Jewish. I guarantee you most Christians—I'm serious now—most Christians don't know that Jesus was a Jew. St. Peter was a Jew, St. Paul, every single one of the Disciples, all Jews. Mary and Joseph, Jews.

During the first decade of Christianity, everybody who believed in Jesus was Jewish. Jesus didn't set out to start a religion. He used his life as a "protest" to "reform" Judaism. He was a "protest reformer" before there was such a thing.

Jump ahead to 1517. The Protestant Reformation was not led by Protestants. There were no Protestants in 1517, no Congregationalists, no Episcopalians, no Methodists, no Baptists in 1517. Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest. All his buddies were Catholic priests. All the Christians who followed him were Catholic. All the Churches he led were Catholic. The German princes who backed him were Catholic. Martin Luther was one very strong, determined, influential Catholic priest, trying his level best, protesting in provocative ways to reform his own Catholic Church. He was not some snide outsider throwing bricks at a religion he didn't like. He was looking at his own religion and realizing "We can do better."

That's what Jesus was doing. Jesus, the Jew, was looking at his religion, Judaism, and saying, "We can do better." Buddha, too. You know, don't you, that Buddha wasn't a Buddhist? He was a Hindu, looking at Hinduism, and saying, "We can do better."

Of course, nobody likes to be critiqued. I remember report cards from my youth. There was E for "Excellent," there was S for "Satisfactory," and there was the dreaded N. N for "Needs improvement." Now, face it. We all "need improvement." Every sane person knows they "need improvement." Some people even want to improve.

If you're watching the baseball playoffs, you've already seen a bunch of teams flame out: the Red Sox, the Washington Nationals, the Cleveland Indians. And if your favorite teams stank all year, the protests began months ago because they got their N much earlier. I guarantee you, every one of those teams is reforming right now.

Smart folks, smart teams, smart religions, smart businesses, they see the end, and they start the reform. But nobody likes getting an N in anything. Nobody likes being told to do better, be better, shape up, improve, fix it. But, sad to say, most of us won't do it on our own. We need to be pushed. By a teacher, a coach, a boss, a parent, a staff sergeant . . . or, by God.

Jesus pushed. Buddha pushed. Martin Luther pushed. America pushed. How do you think we got to be America? America was formed and reformed by a long history of protestors. Beginning with the Pilgrims, who protested against . . . have you forgotten? Other Protestants. That's why the Protestant Pilgrims, ardent Congregationalists, came to Massachusetts because they couldn't abide Protestant England, and they weren't happy in Protestant Holland, so they tried

to make their own Protestant heaven on Cape Cod. But they made life so miserable for some of their own that folks protested. Yes, Protestants protesting Protestants, hoping to reform the reformers, who did not like getting an N on their report card. So they kicked out Anne Hutchinson (of the famed Hutchinson River Parkway) and tried to kill Roger Williams, who escaped to and founded Rhode Island.

And that was 350 years ago. The protests go on, the reforming goes on, because, let's face it, those dreaded report cards keep showing up. "N: Needs Improvement."

The good news is and the reason we are talking about it this October is the Reformation worked. Catholicism reformed. Protestantism emerged and reforms itself continually. Now, the Protestant Reformation did not just show up one day. Like all successful reformations or innovations or revolutions, it was the result of several key ingredients coming together at just the right time.

Luther didn't originate the Reformation. He inherited a groundswell of ideas that linked perfectly with the stirrings across Europe in his time. Luther had the force of personality and the power of perfect timing, excellent scholarship, the vision, and frankly, the marketing and branding skills to bring it all together and to change Christianity forever.

Worship in the language of the people. Bible in the hands of the people. Music in the mouths of the people. All of Holy Communion for all of the people. Empowerment of the people. The "priesthood of all believers." Budding nationalism. Budding freedom. Martin Luther made it happen. The politics of the day helped it happen. The dukes and barons and kings and such wanted out from under the pope's control. The invention of the printing press took the complaints of a no-account priest and spread them across Europe.

One of the key books of economic theory is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He declares that it was the Reformation that let loose the power of the individual, the entrepreneurial gift of creativity and ingenuity. Protestantism became the engine of progress. The Reformation changed art forever, changed economics, politics, Europe, and religion forever. It was no small thing, however imperfect and brutal.

This is a sorry excuse for a sermon. I've come close to the end and haven't even mentioned Scripture! And that would be a huge mistake. If the Protestant Reformation was about anything, it was Scripture. More than the Pope, more than what Communion really is, more than political gamesmanship, it was about the Bible. The biggest result of the Reformation was getting the Bible translated into everyone's language, getting the Bible printed and distributed,

getting people to read so they could understand the Bible, getting priests to become preachers to explain the Bible, getting hymns written so folks could sing the Bible, getting worship to concentrate the Bible, getting you to think for yourself after you've read the Bible. And it was in the Bible that the reformers found or re-found the heartbeat of Christianity: Faith. Not laws, not dos and don'ts. Not fear. Not power. Not grandeur. *Faith.*

It's no different today. Christianity is overrun with Churches of every stripe, glorifying size, glamour, wealth, popularity, power. Here, on top of this hill, we try to hew close to Jesus: his life, his teachings, his faith, his Church. Not Protestant. Not Catholic. His.

Remember my grandparent/parent/teenager analogy of Judeo-Christian history? I'd say Greenfield Hill is the great-grandchild. Pouring through us is the DNA of all those traditions. We are the product, the proud product of Protestant and Catholic love, with a good healthy stream of Judaism right in the heart, from a Jew named Jesus

Let's end with a little hymn that we quoted in our Prayer of Confession, "Spirit of the Living God," No. 259 in your Hymnal,

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.  
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me,  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.  
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us,  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.*