

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: A Post-Easter, Post-Dogwood, Post-Winter, Pentecost Sermon
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture Litany

Together: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." (Acts 2:1-3)

Leader: "You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit if the Spirit of God lives in you." (Romans 8:9)

People: "God has sent the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts." (Galatians 4:6) "The Spirit testifies that we are God's children." (Romans 8:16)

Leader: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16)

People: "God will send another Counselor to be with you forever -- the Spirit of Truth . . . who will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said." (John 14:16-17, 26)

Together: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." (Ephesians 4:30) "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

Leader: "The Spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." (Isaiah 61:1)

Our Church has joined an organization called *CONNECT* (Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut). And it's pretty much what it sounds like. It's a group of Christian Churches, Protestant and Catholic, plus Jewish synagogues and a mosque, from Norwalk to New Haven; interfaith, interracial, nonpartisan, and the purpose is to "CONNECT" in order to accomplish some greater good. I was in a meeting with them this week, and the Catholic priest to my right, he's retiring; and the Rabbi across from me is retiring; and the Episcopal priest on my left is thinking of retiring; and everybody is asking them, "What are you going to do? Especially that first week?"

I remember when I had been president of Habitat for Humanity for nine years and my time was up, a dear friend made an appointment to see me. "It's urgent," he said. He comes to my office, he says, "I'm worried about you! You know how many people die and have strokes or heart attacks in the first weeks after leaving a big job, completing a major project, or stopping doing what they've been doing for so long?" And my friend told me several grisly stories and made me really nervous!

Well, I don't know about morbidity rates the week after our Dogwood Festival, but it is true that after every big event, there is a letdown, a change of pace, a sense of "what now?" Athletes have popularized this with their appearances right after winning some big championship, a World Series or Super Bowl, and they'll look into the camera and say, "I'm going to Disney World." The idea is that they're emotionally and physically exhausted, they're drained, they've been operating at a high level of intensity for a long time, they need a break, so, off to Disney World!

Big events are like that. Retirements. Graduations. Family weddings. Closing a big deal. Finishing something important. Naturally, I was thinking about this on Monday right after our 83rd Dogwood Festival. A year of hard work and planning; a month of pulling it all together; the week before, lots of cleaning, setting up, pricing, organizing, a flurry of activity by a host of volunteers, day after day, hour after hour. Amazing!

Then Monday morning comes. The craft folks have left. The crowds are gone. The tents are taken down. Signs are put away. It's quiet here, eerily quiet. All that hard, important, creative, sacrificial work . . . done! Now what?

Alida and I face that after every Advent, every Lent, specifically Christmas Eve and Easter. We get 1,300 people through here on Christmas Eve. It's beautiful, inspiring, overwhelming, and the next Sunday there are about 85 people here. And we had 1,000 this year for Easter, the most in our history, and then the whole Church went to sleep for a month. We have this great spiritual

extravaganza, and then it's "O.K., now what?" How do we top that? What are we supposed to do next?

Then I started thinking about Pentecost, which is today. Pentecost means "50." It takes place 50 days after Easter and is celebrated as the birthday of Christianity. Here's the quick backstory: Jesus gets crucified on Good Friday, raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. Then for several weeks Jesus shows up around Israel, offering what the Bible calls "convincing proofs" that he really is alive. He sat with people, ate with people, talked with people, walked with people. Convincing enough that a lot of people literally bet their lives on the fact that this was real. So he does that for a few weeks, then goes up to heaven, telling his followers to wait for something.

Pentecost is that "something." Jesus's followers were waiting together in a room, when God's Spirit came upon them, a mighty wind rushed through the room out of nowhere, tongues of fire appeared just above their heads, and they all began to speak in a sort of heavenly language. Out of that group emerged Peter, an illiterate but brash fisherman. He took hold of the crowd in downtown Jerusalem, he held them spellbound as he told them about Jesus in such a compelling way that immediately 3,000 people, 3,000, decided to put their faith in Christ and be baptized. That was one heck of a day. They could have gone to Disney World the next week. They deserved it!

In one fell swoop, Christianity went from a no-account, small-town, leaderless bunch of scared nobodies to a formidable movement—passionate, growing, charismatic, bold. This was an impressive, monumental, successful, spectacular accomplishment. Like winning a world championship. Like a great big Dogwood Festival. Like a packed Church on Christmas Eve. Like Prince Harry's wedding. Like getting into your favorite college or graduating from it. Like finding a great job or finishing a great career or completing a really important endeavor in your life

Now what? Well, we have terms for "now what," don't we? "Aftermath" is sort of neutral; it refers to the time after. "Afterglow" is more positive, the idea of some lingering positivity, energy, joy. Sadly, the more common experience is "crashing," and that's what people fear: "crashing." A great big emotional letdown that can lead to lethargy, sleeping, depression, sickness. If accomplishing something major is like going from 0 to 60 in a burst of power, "crashing" is like going from 60 to 0 in a hard minute. Pulling all the terms together I think we'd all agree that in the aftermath post-Easter, post-Dogwood, post-Pentecost, post-anything, we'd rather aim for "afterglow" than for "crashing."

For Dogwood, a significant next day is evaluation. Yes, how much money came in that we can use to help others, the poor and the needy? That's a factor. But going deeper, people begin to ask what worked, what didn't? What can be changed, tweaked, fixed, replaced? What was forgotten, overlooked? What's worth it, what isn't? And . . . "what now?" All those questions drive us back to the core: What's it all about? Why all the fuss, the effort? Why have an 84th Dogwood?

The answer to that links with the answer to "now what?" post-Pentecost. I put it all under the heading of "Pastoral Care." In popular usage, "pastoral care" is what we ordained pastors do for you when you need us. When you're sick, we visit you; when you're dead, we bury you; when you're engaged, we'll marry you; when you're in jail, we'll bail you out. "Pastoral care" usually means when you need us, we are there. Because we're the pastors.

We get the idea from Jesus, who calls himself the "Good Shepherd." Get it? Sheep. Shepherd. Pasture. Pastoral. Pastor. Pastoral care. The good shepherd, the pastor, looks after the sheep, keeps them together, and if one wanders off, the shepherd finds it. That's what we do. We are ordained pastors. That's too narrow a definition. Pastoral care is really supposed to be our, all of our effort to look out for one another; all of you plus us, the "royal we," the collective us, our approach to Church.

Let's go back to Dogwood, and then I'll close off with Pentecost. This week I met with about 60 of our Church leaders, and I talked with them about what I called the "Pastoral Dogwood." And I told them, yes, sure, Dogwood is busy, and it's business, and there are 72 vendors we want to be happy; and our areas we want to go well; we want to make money, to help charities; and, please, God, we'd like some sun; and sell some raffle tickets, buy some plants, eat some food. Yes, to all of that. Important. Well done. Great work. Be proud. But that's only part of the story. Let's remember the "Pastoral."

As Dogwood began to close up, it's drizzling, it's freezing, when Betsy and Kim came up to me. They wanted me to know about one of the vendors, the one with all the owl products, whose son has had three crucial brain surgeries and is undergoing treatment even now. They had just been with her, promising prayers, offering love, and a listening ear. That's "pastoral care."

And the ice cream family from Maine. Let's face it, we can have the Dogwood Festival without dogwoods in bloom, without sun—we've done that! But can we do Dogwood without the ice cream man? Every year they come down from rural Maine. The wife has been in declining health year after year. But they come together. He wheels her across the sodden grass, a model of human love; that love itself a model of divine love; all that love freely given by them to every

customer, and by every customer to them. And we look after them. Yep, "Pastoral Care."

And then, three big spiritual highlights of Dogwood Sunday, Mother's Day. One cool thing about this Church is Alida and I get credit for everything. Maybe it's because we've been here for so long, people always thank us for good ideas, events, good successes. Well, let me tell you a secret. The best good ideas for Dogwood Mother's Day Sunday came from Dogwood Chairs and community folks, not us, and they're all pastoral. It was our own Dogwood leaders who, a decade ago, said we should do the blessing of the animals; who, a few years ago, said we should close Dogwood with the Pivot House Gospel Choir; who, this year, said we should have an extra-special Mother's Day service Sunday morning and a "Blessing of Mothers" service in the afternoon. Pastoral Care. Pastoral Care. *Pastoral Care*. Yes, even blessing of the animals.

As we were getting ready to bless the animals, a family came up to the Church steps with their tiny little dog, 18½ years old; "Merlin" was his name. A gift of magic in their lives all these years, and soon he would die. So, yes, I prayed with them, all three of them, and later they sat in the sanctuary for a long time. "Pastoral Care."

And the Pivot House men, up here, courageously baring their souls and singing their hearts out as they leave behind broken lives of addiction. Here because we love them, here because that Dogwood raffle, plant sale, Blossom Café, Kate's Corner money keeps them fresh. So they pastor to us, we pastor to them. "Pastoral Care."

And a brand-new Mother's Day design thought up by our Dogwood leaders for the simple purpose of making the day more . . . more loving, more real, yes, more "pastoral."

And so we had one big service in the morning with Mary Jacobson bringing down the house reading my story about a mother's love. Then at 3 in the afternoon, our first-ever blessing service with beautiful music and heartfelt memories.

We didn't do it, Alida and I. We didn't think it. Instead, we all pastored one another. It was a Pastoral Dogwood Festival.

What's the link to Pentecost? Well, those early followers of Jesus have this splendid, momentous occasion. They take over Jerusalem with their passion, God's spirit works through them, bringing 3,000 people and their families to the wonders of Christlikeness, and a desire to do it, to be like Christ. And the next day, the "now what?" day, when the aftermath could come "crashing" down,

when they could have all sat around saying, "What do we do for an encore?" Well, what did they do for an encore? By now, I think you can guess the answer: "Pastoral Care." You're right!

The next day, the next week, the next month, all those early Jesus folks had a great challenge or a great opportunity, depending on how you look at it. Thousands of people counting on you, looking to you, needing you, is either a gigantic pain in the neck or an incredible blessing. All those early Jesus people, Peter, James, and John, Mary Magdalene, Jesus's mother Mary, poor old "Doubting Thomas," all the rest of them, they woke up post-Pentecost, and nobody would have blamed them if they had just rolled over and gone back to sleep. Crash. Wiped out. Drained. Exhausted. Leave 'em alone for a while.

Instead, the Bible tells us, from that day forward they met together, ate together, devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, and prayer. They were in one another's homes, they were joyful. "All the believers were together and shared everything in common, giving to all according to their need, testifying to the resurrection of Jesus with their every word and every deed." (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-34)

Basically, they got down to business. And the business of Church is people, caring for people, in a pastoral, Good Shepherd, personal, loving way: "Pastoral Care."

That was the power let loose by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit empowered a Church movement which, when at our best, loves more than anything else, loves better than anything else. Our neighbor. Our friends. The stranger. The poor. The enemy. The untouchable. The ice cream vendor from Maine. The owl lady. "Merlin," the dog.

And sometimes it's at a lacrosse game, a nursing home, a graduation party, a hospital room, a funeral home, a wedding, a living room; or just walking around town, bumping into people at exactly the right moment. You, me, us, we, all together, the proof that Pentecost power is still real and always Pastoral.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine," number 241 in your Hymnal:

*Holy Spirit, Truth divine,
dawn upon this soul of mine.
Voice of God, and inward Light,
wake my spirit, clear my sight.*

*Holy Spirit, Love divine,
glow within this heart of mine.
Kindle every high desire;
purify me with your fire.*

*Holy Spirit, Pow'r divine,
fill and nerve this will of mine.
Boldly may I always live,
bravely serve and gladly give.*

*Holy Spirit, Peace divine,
still this restless heart of mine.
Speak to calm this tossing sea,
grant me your tranquility.*

*Holy Spirit, Joy divine,
gladden now this heart of mine.
In the desert ways I sing,
spring, O living Water, spring!*