

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 1, 2018
Sermon Title: A Gravedigger's America
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Our Litany for America

Deacon: "Get thee to a far country," God said to Abraham. And they made a covenant, each to be a blessing to the other.

People: Our ancestors, or even we ourselves, left some place far away to come to this far country. This was our Promised Land, our Providence, our new Canaan.

Deacon: Joshua said to Israel as they came to the Promised Land, "Choose this day whom thou shalt serve. As for me and my family, we shall serve the Lord."

People: Dare we make the same choice? With flag held high and patriot's fervor, here in the Promised Land, dare we choose to serve God above all? We dare.

Deacon: "If my people will humble themselves and pray, and seek me, and turn from wickedness, I will hear them and heal their land." (Chronicles 7:14)

All: Holy God, we do call upon your name in times of joy and difficulty. We call upon your name to guide us, protect us, use us. Heal us from all that divides us, from all that wounds us. Take us at our best, and our worst, and make us better.

The New York Times had a powerful op-ed on Memorial Day weekend titled, "What Makes Arlington Cemetery Special." It was written by Elliott Ackerman, who served five tours, *five*, in Iraq and Afghanistan. He talked about the daily ritual he and his fellow Marines had before every "dangerous mission." Let me just read a portion to you: "When I served in the Marines, we used to say something to one another before particularly dangerous missions. I remember

having this exchange with my friend Aaron . . . as we loaded into separate helicopters for a raid deep into a valley held by the Taliban . . . The situation was tense . . . so we shook hands and simply told each other, 'See you after.' . . . or, if we didn't come home, we'd meet up in that other after." *See you after . . . or, the other after.* (Ackerman, Elliot. "What Makes Arlington Cemetery Special." *The New York Times*, 31 May 2018. p. A23)

That's the kind of hope that has inspired soldiers to risk "the ultimate sacrifice," the idea that there are things worth living for, the best we can; *and* some worth dying for, if need be. And it's O.K. because there is the other after. And that's the kind of hope that has inspired Christian folks. *Also*, the idea that some things are worth living for, the best we can; *or* worth dying for, if need be. And that's O.K. because we believe in another after.

Soldiers and Christians also share common imagery and language. Listen to how St. Paul tells Christians to get ready for daily life: "Put on the full armor of God," Paul writes, "for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of the dark world, the spiritual forces of evil . . . Put on the full armor of God so that you may be able to stand your ground. Stand firm with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit." Paul is ready to do battle, offensively and defensively, but he says there is a way to do it, a way to go about it, different from the way most things are done."

I'll bet many of you grew up singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

*Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus
going on before!
Christ, the royal Master,
leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
see his banner go!*

Nowadays it doesn't get sung too much, but I can tell you over my pastoral career, whenever I wanted my Church to sing full-throttle, no holding back, all I had to do was use "America the Beautiful" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers"!

There's a common theme here, whether it's St. Paul's instructions for battle readiness or the hymn's clarion call to victory or the Marine saying to his friend, "See you after . . . or in the other after."

In the world struggle, whatever that struggle might be, there is now, and there is after now. The struggle for justice, the struggle against terrorism, the struggle for rights, the struggle against violence, the struggle for our earth, the struggle against cancer; or, our personal struggles: with school, with work, with addiction, with relationships; or, let's face it, our struggles in our beloved country.

Right now in America it feels as though everything is talked about as if there is no tomorrow, no after after. That's antithetical to both Christianity and America! The whole idea of Christianity is that there is an after after. The whole idea of America is that there is a brighter tomorrow. The whole idea of both is that there is a way to go at it *and* a way *not* to go at it.

I read a wonderful story in *The Boston Globe* back around Memorial Day weekend about a 73-year-old gravedigger in the Massachusetts National Cemetery. He digs the graves for all the veterans laid to rest there, and he has a strong belief about what he does. His workplace is a sacred place of deep gratitude, respect, and eternal rest. So he does everything just right—perfect symmetry, true alignment. He wants each corner of the grave to be precise. It's got to be surgically correct, he says, it's the respectful and dignified thing to do. He's doing that for the dead veterans. Why wouldn't we want the same respect and dignity in the whole country for which those vets put their lives on the line? (Farragan, Thomas. "Creating a Resting Place Befitting a Hero." *The Boston Globe*, 26 May, 2018. p. B1)

I'm not saying don't think, don't care, don't stand up, or don't speak up. I *am* saying there ought to be a difference between how you, we, Greenfield Hill Church type of Christians, we who use "Christlike" all the time as our highest goal, there ought to be a difference between us and everyone else freaking out. And that difference should be apparent, readily apparent, in our talk, in our tone.

We Christians have long debated who is going to hell. Jesus is actually fairly specific: whoever is the opposite of loving is in trouble. So you figure out the most loving thing to do and do it, and you don't need to worry. If you don't do it, you might want to spend a little more time on your knees in prayer, begging forgiveness.

Is what I'm about to say loving? Or not loving? Is what I'm about to do loving? Or not loving? Is something my government is doing loving? Or not loving? Is my response to my government loving? Or not loving? Within these four walls, that's what we've been preaching a long time.

A Church member this week reminded me how I got to be pastor here. Picking a pastor in this Church is much like the way it's done in your business. There is an opening. People apply. You interview, narrow down the choices. Pick one. Bring that one in to show their stuff. So in April 1997 I was invited to come here and show my stuff. And that Church member reminded me that my stuff was a sermon about "kindness." Kindness, being kind. I got the job. So it's no surprise that for 21 years I've been pretty consistent. Be nice. Be kind. Love—one another, your neighbor, the stranger, and, yep, the enemy. If you think that's drivel, if you don't want to hear that stuff, get rid of me.

Many of you remember Len Morgan. He used to say, "Just put me on an ice floe, and push me out to sea." So, if you don't want to hear about kindness, niceness, love, just put me on an ice floe, and push me out to sea. Until then, I'm going to be your broken record: be nice, be kind, be loving.

One of the few times Jesus links hell with a specific behavior is in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Anyone who says to his brother 'Raca'," is answerable to the religious authorities. But anyone who says, 'you fool,' will be in danger of hell." (Matthew 5:22) Nobody knows what "Raca" means, but it was enough to get you hauled before the religious leaders; you were in big trouble if you said "Raca." But that's nothing, Jesus says, compared to saying "you fool." Nothing compared to using your words and your tone to hurt somebody, to insult, minimize, divide.

Let's look at our little world outside these beautiful windows. It feels as if, it sounds as if America is a battleground between Rosanne Barr and Samantha Bee. Can you imagine such a thing? That what now passes for public discourse, political opinion, commentary, is something newsworthy? And then . . . two guys walk into a bakery asking the baker at the bakery to make their wedding cake; the baker says his religion forbids a baker from baking a wedding cake for two guys. And the Supreme Court applauds the baker. Some of us thought this was settled way back 40, 50 years ago, that a public place, open to the public, couldn't just decide not to serve somebody willy-nilly just because of who they are. Silly me.

And then we're dismayed when a restaurant kicks the president's spokesperson out of the restaurant. Come on, guys, we're better than this! If you're a baker, bake, for Pete's sake. And if you're a restaurant, take the order, whip it up, put it on a plate, and serve it. Nicely. Kindly. Lovingly. You don't need to take a vote to be nice. You don't need the Supreme Court to be kind.

This week I've been immersed in hospital visits. One lady in the last days of her life. One lady in a coma after several heart attacks. One lady in the ICU after a bad fall. One lady brought in by emergency, the hallway filled with her family as

she hung between life and death. I prayed with them all. And it got me wondering how we'd like it if our hospitals functioned like the rest of society. A dear grandmother gets wheeled into the hospital, the staff hovers around her with utmost interest: "Whom did you vote for?" they ask. "What is your stand on immigration?" "Oh, I see you signed a petition about gun control. Sorry, no room for you here."

Once upon a time we functioned like that, but we're better than that now. Why? Because there is an after after. We try, and then we try harder. We learn, and then we learn more. In one of the great books about World War II, the author said the difference between American and German soldiers was when a German tank broke down, they waited for orders. When an American tank broke down, they went under the hood and fixed it. We should never deny being broken. We should always deny being stuck.

Since you go to Church here, you must drive up Bronson Road a lot. So you drive by that historic Greenfield Hill Cemetery. It's behind a tall stone wall. So for most of my years here, the cemetery was invisible. For years I never saw a thing there, just the tall stone wall. Maybe a dozen years ago I did a burial there. We went in, held a service, scattered the ashes. That's when I discovered why you couldn't see anything above the wall. Because all the headstones were fallen over, flat on the ground, crumbling, broken, a sorry mess.

But something has happened in the last year or so. Every week or so you drive by that old cemetery, and there's another headstone popping up above the wall, freshly cleaned, restored, set in place (dare I say, *resurrected?*), proudly poking its head above the surroundings. First one, then five, now 25, 35, and more. All started by our own Jeff Taylor, working long hours by himself; then, slowly, others catching the fever, joining in. Some folks from our Church, then some Cub Scouts, now our Boy Scout Troop. Some of our high schoolers, each doing their part.

That reminds me of America. Do you ever think about what Obama and Trump have in common? Obama's mantra was "Hope and Change." Trump's is "Make America Great Again." That's 10 straight years of presidents who said we can do better . . . which shouldn't surprise anybody because we *can* do better.

Isn't that the great American promise, each generation a step forward? Isn't that the Christian ideal, to be forgiven, to be renewed, to be better one day than the day before? Isn't that the Marines' promise, "See you after," when the worst is over; and if need be, "see you in the other after"?

There's always improvement down the road, where, like Jeff's cemetery, things look better today than they did a year ago, what was crumbled has been repaired. What was fallen down has been raised up. What was unseen is now honored. That should be America, every day, not some loser idea that our best days are behind us. Not some lament for the "good old days."

I love (and believe) this quote from David Brooks. He says, ". . . it's a blunt fact that most great social reforms have happened in moments of optimism, not moments of pessimism, in moments of encouraging progress, not in moments of perceived threat. (Brooks, David. "The Problem of Wokeness." *The New York Times*, 7 June, 2018, p. A27)

I'm an optimist, as a Christian and an American. It's what got America founded. It's what got America built. It's what got America improved. And it's the heart of Christianity. We believe in Easter, remember? Only an optimist can declare, as St. Paul did, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

We are a whole religion built on optimism, on the other after. We need to start sounding like what we believe. We're not mired in fear. We're not built for pessimism. So we need to start sounding like what we truly believe.

Our final hymn is "My Country 'Tis of Thee," No. 721. Let's stand and sing our love for our country:

*My country, 'tis of thee,
sweet land of liberty,
of thee I sing;
land where my fathers died,
land of the pilgrims' pride,
from every mountainside
let freedom ring.*

*My native country, thee,
land of the noble free,
thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
thy woods and templed hills;
my heart with rapture thrills,
like that above.*

*Let music swell the breeze,
and ring from all the trees
sweet freedom's song;
let mortal tongues awake;
let all that breathe partake;*

*let rocks their silence break,
the sound prolong.*

*Our fathers' God, to thee,
author of liberty,
to thee we sing;
long may our land be bright
with freedom's holy light;
protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King.*