

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Lessons from the Pastoral Life of
My Father
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Romans 5:1-11

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

My dad loved this Church. And you loved him back. He loved the Dogwood Festival, he loved Sunday worship, he loved our choir, he loved the feeling of life, vibrancy, joy that always seems to fill this Church.

He died in July after a fascinating life of 96 years, including 70 as a Church pastor. It occurred to me that it might be fun, interesting, even useful, to look at my father's career and make some points about what it means to be a Church, to be a pastor, to do ministry, lessons we can apply right here, right now, in the 21st century.

This won't be a eulogy. My sisters and I did all that at his funeral in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. We had a great time doing it, telling about his life, his quirks, his memories.

My father believed that everybody should study Latin. He quite insisted upon it. So to make him happy, at the burial, we had everybody read Psalm 1 in Latin.

He loved baseball, loved the lottery, loved ice cream, and loved arguing. He worshipped education: books, learning, vocabulary. He loved my mother, and that love-light never diminished in the 31 years he was a widower. And he loved work; and for him, from the time he was 18, work was Church.

I've said this to you at least 20 times. If you like me as your pastor, if you like what I do, or how I do it, I learned it all from my father. Whatever you don't like, I learned on my own.

So today's worship celebrates the work he loved to do, from the Scriptures to the music to my sermon.

This is how I began my father's eulogy:

"My father . . . Let's see . . .
There were drug dealers he bailed out,
a murderer whose defense he funded,
rock 'n' roll bands that got started in his Church basements,
 there were HITTERS who couldn't HIT
 and FIELDERS who couldn't FIELD,
but they all got to play
 on teams he funded
 and leagues he founded.

 The POOR got fed . . .
 the LONELY got visited . . .
 the DYING, comforted . . .
 yes, the LOST got found . . .
He played handball with the Rabbi,
sort of dated a NUN in later widowhood.
Debated he MUSLIMS before that was a thing.
HOUSED the HOMELESS when that wasn't a popular thing,
and he loved the Jehovah's Witnesses
 whenever they rang the doorbell."

That's all true. My father was a bit like Alida, a Pied Piper of young people. He had a tremendous youth ministry, and it wasn't all easy. On the hard streets of

Brooklyn and Queens in the hard years between the '50s and the '80s, amidst gang violence and drug epidemics, he maintained a sunny, positive view of every teenager.

He spent tens of thousands of dollars on the futile defense of a youngster in his Church who killed another youngster at a party. He lost tens of thousands of dollars when he bailed out two brothers busted for selling drugs, and they jumped bail. But there was a rationale behind all of this: my father believed in people, any people, all people. He believed in their innocence, in their inner innocence, maybe not their outer innocence, but he believed that inside, everyone had good waiting to burst forth into beauty.

He believed in second chances, third chances, 10th chances. Jesus said to forgive 70 times seven. "That's 490," my father would tell me, "and I'm trying to get to 490!" Well, I know he reached that magic number with *me*, and I'm pretty sure he got close with a lot of others. But my point is it was all in a day's work. Church life is anything and everything for anyone at any time, anywhere. Let me repeat that *Church life is anything and everything for anyone at any time, anywhere.*

The Scripture we read at the start fits my father to a T. It's St. Paul's advice to a young pastor, Timothy. Paul wrote, "*Preach the word. Be instant, constant, active in and out of season. Do the work of an evangelist. Do all your duties. Keep your head in all situations. Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith. Take the crown.*"

A tall order, isn't it? It reminds me of the parody of an old adage: "Put your shoulder to the wheel, your nose to the grindstone, keep your feet square on the ground, your eye on the ball. Now try to work that way!"

But that is a pastor's life when done right, and my father did it right. So for him, when he got up in the morning, he was a pastor. When he went to sleep, he was a pastor. And in between, everything he did all day long, all week long, all year long, it was as a pastor.

Some of it was doing the obvious. He and I went to the same seminary, and they taught us to work hard—very hard on each sermon, up to 20 hours a week on each sermon.

Preaching is an amazing privilege. You give us 20 minutes each Sunday to tell you what we believe God wants you to know this week. So it's a serious matter. You don't dash it off in an hour. It's not personal opinion. My father didn't live in his study with his head buried in books, crafting the perfect sermon all week long. No. He walked the streets of his city, visiting the sick, visiting the shut-

ins, visiting the hospitals, visiting the prisons, doing funerals, preparing for weddings, teaching classes, all the obvious parts of Church life.

In the meantime, he led meetings of Protestants and Catholics back when Protestants and Catholics didn't think each other were Christians! He had worship with the local synagogue back when Christians thought Jews couldn't go to heaven. And when a cross was burned on the front lawn of a new black family in the neighborhood, he was the first one there. And when Martin Luther King, Jr., asked American clergy to leave what they were doing and to get to Selma quickly to join his historic march, my father took his first plane ride ever, and marched with Dr. King.

And when the New York subways went on strike, my father got up at 4 AM to drive his Church members to work, several rides a day in each direction.

He founded the Little League and Babe Ruth League. He founded and funded sports teams for boys and girls, delivered food door to door to the poor and elderly, and spoke to public officials about issues that concerned his people. All in a day's work. All part of being a pastor.

Do you know what the word "pastor" means? It means "shepherd." Pastor. Pastoral. Pasture. Pastoral care. It all has to do with the shepherd caring for the sheep in the most loving, all-inclusive, protective way. Jesus referred to himself as "the Good Shepherd," and in one of his famous parables, he tells of the shepherd who gave up everything to relentlessly find and save one lost sheep.

That was my father. That's a pastor. For my father, the whole neighborhood, the whole city was his pasture, and his job was to be the "Good Shepherd," no matter who they were or how far they wandered. It's actually rather straightforward: whatever you've got to do, do it.

On Sunday nights, he would go to the Bowery, the old Bowery Rescue Mission, and preach; or go to Harlem to hear Malcolm X.; or take us all to a Church family's house to watch "Bonanza." It was all ministry to him. Sitting with a Church family watching TV, being with Malcolm X and his followers, preaching the Good News to the Bowery "bums," was all in a day's work, all ministry.

When I was deciding to become a pastor, that was the only model I had, and it looked like a great life to me. Every day is different, every hour of every day is different, and whatever we do, we do for the glory of God, and it counts. So if you ever wonder about what Alida and I do, or why and how, there is a method to our madness: the method is my father's; the madness is ours.

Now, let me talk about the Bible. On this day when we've made a big deal out of giving our third-graders their first Bibles, my father's own Biblical journey is a good lesson for us.

He grew up in a very fundamentalist Christian religion: hellfire and damnation, where the hellfire was really hot, and damnation was forever, and was for most everybody. The return of Christ to this earth was imminent. People told me that when my grandfather preached about Jesus's second coming, he was so convincing that half the Church was afraid to go outside in case it had happened, and the other half rushed to go outside, hoping it had happened.

The result of such thinking—the reward of heaven for a few, the hellfire for many—the result led to religion solely focused on individual salvation: Are you saved? Do you know where you'll spend eternity? All this was around my father growing up in a little town in rural Maine.

My father left Maine for Bible College in Boston and began a most interesting transition. It was the early 1940s. World War II was raging. Horrors and atrocities were ravaging the world. Racism and poverty ravaged his world. Good and evil were definitely at war, and my father made a decision: He would stand for justice. He would spend less time condemning an individual and more time changing society. He didn't give up on salvation; he extended it, broadened it.

For him, A.A. was part of salvation. He had seen the devastation of alcoholism everywhere he went, and so A.A. was as important to his Church life as the altar call was to his father's ministry. My father had so many A.A. meetings in his Church that the Church hired a sexton just for their meetings.

And for him, keeping kids off the streets, fully engaged and active, was part of salvation. For two years he got five Churches to hire me to do anything I could think of to work with kids. Nowadays, if Jesus came back today, you couldn't get five Churches to work together to have a welcome-home party for him. But my father could pick pockets all over New York City to find the money to help young people, to save young people. And we did it every which way: sports, films, a coffeehouse, Vacation Bible School, Bible Study, dances, worship, trips.

Loving your lonely neighbor and feeding your hungry neighbor were part of salvation. Reaching across racial barriers, economic barriers, religious barriers, treating people with dignity and respect—all part of salvation.

Now, what I've just described is classic post-World War II Liberal Protestantism, which, if I may exaggerate a little bit, sidelined Jesus, eliminated God, skipped over the Bible, and ended up becoming irrelevant. All with good intentions.

In the 1950s, mainline Protestants ruled the roost. Churches dominated the town square. Every town had a "Church Street," littered with Churches. First Baptist. First Methodist. First Presbyterian. First Congregational. Plus one Episcopal Church, all within a one-mile radius. Brooklyn, where my father pastored for 25 years, is called "The Borough of Churches." One on every corner, plus some. So it seemed pretty easy. And all together, people wanted to do good. But not talk about Jesus. Not quote the Bible. Not mention God.

That wasn't my father. He left behind the hellfire and damnation fundamentalism of his growing up, he embraced the call for social justice, but he never left behind the Bible. The Bible was his foundation stone. The Bible was the rock upon which he built his life's work as a pastor. He wasn't a slave to it, he wasn't afraid of it, but he could feel God breathing through every part of it, wrestling with it, applying it.

When he died, my sisters asked what I wanted of his possessions. "Just his Bible," I said. And I have it. Well worn, well used, his Bible. The last two years of his life Dad lived in excellent nursing homes in Brooklyn: the Orthodox Jewish Boro Park Center and the Norwegian Christian Home, both places of great faith and great care. When we visited him, we'd always see him at a distance before he saw us—sometimes in the hall or the activities room or the dining room or on the patio or in his own room. Always with the Bible opened, on his lap. *Always*.

And whenever the nurses came to take him somewhere, they'd say, "Do you need anything?" And he'd say, "Just my Bible." For him, the Bible was the beginning of everything; the beginning, not the end.

There are basically two kinds of Christians: the ones where the Bible is the end, the end of discussion, the end of thought. So they've got their three or four verses supporting slavery, six or seven verses against homosexuality, a couple of verses telling you to obey your government no matter what, a chapter or two predicting the end of the world, three or four on predestination, and Bingo! You're all set, don't need to think anymore.

There's an old saying, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." Those are the folks for whom the Bible is the end. The other kinds of folks are the ones who just dismiss the Bible—good stories, some wise sayings, a little philosophy, mostly irrelevant, stodgy, ahistorical. Don't bother with it.

My father left the first group and never joined the other group. For him, the Bible was the beginning; that's where you start. It's your grounding. See where it takes you. Let it make your head spin. Wrestle with it. Argue with it. Critique

it. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be intimidated by it. Don't worship it. Learn from it.

My grandfather began preaching at age 20, did it for 60 years. He loved the Bible through the prism of the Books of Daniel and Revelation, the books that most tell about the end of the world, Judgment Day, hellfire. He was a great pastor, worthy of a whole other sermon.

My father loved the Bible through the prism of Jesus, the Prophets, and St. Paul. The Prophets gave us God's bottom line: justice, doing the right thing. Jesus showed us how to do it with an unreachable love and an impossible grace that is actually reachable and possible.

And St. Paul told us what Church should be, a place where God's justice and Jesus's love get lived out by people who dare to believe. He spent 70 years making that happen.

My mother died in 1987, and my father lived 31 years with an immense sorrow. Paradoxically, it never left him, yet never paralyzed him, an almost beautiful combination. In these later years, we would talk about dying, death, his funeral, burial—all the things that children of my generation have to pull out of an older generation that really doesn't want to talk about any of that. Old Mainers just die. They don't talk about it, plan for it, or rush toward it.

One day, I asked my dad what he believes heaven is. Without hesitation, he said, "The place where our fondest hopes are realized." That makes sense, not just Biblically or spiritually, but it feels like perfect symmetry. He spent his whole life trying to help others realize their fondest hopes. And he has eternity now, with my mother, to enjoy his fondest hopes.

We celebrated my father's 90th birthday right here at Greenfield Hill Church, over in the Memorial Room. During it, we sang an old, old hymn from my father's growing-up days in Maine, a hymn about heaven. Let's stand and sing "Oh, Beulah Land," printed on the inside back cover of your bulletin.

O, Beulah Land

*I've reached the land of corn and wine,
And all its riches freely mine;
Here shines undimmed one blissful day,
For all my night has passed away.*

Refrain:

*O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,
As on thy highest mount I stand,
I look away across the sea,
Where mansions are prepared for me,
And view the shining glory shore,
My heav'n, my home forevermore!*

*My Savior comes and walks with me,
And sweet communion here have we;
He gently leads me by His hand,
For this is Heaven's borderland.*

Refrain

*A sweet perfume upon the breeze,
Is borne from ever vernal trees,
And flow'rs that never fading grow
Where streams of life forever flow.*

Refrain

*The zephyrs seem to float to me,
Sweet sounds of Heaven's melody,
As angels with the white-robed throng
Join in the sweet redemption song.*

Refrain