

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: David's White Paper –
The Sermon Version
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22

Revelation 3:14-22

'And to the angel of the Church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.'

Well, I read the headline "11 Congregants Killed in Synagogue." Remember how we began autumn at Greenfield Hill Church? On an early September Sunday, we had two women from an earlier headline: "Nine Congregants Killed at Church Bible Study." One of those ladies lost her father. The other lady survived the slaughter but lost so many friends, including her pastor.

Eleven Jews in Pittsburgh, nine blacks in Charlestown—the twin sins of America, racism and anti-Semitism that we can't shake. Remember the protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, a year ago? It was a white supremacist, neo-Nazi, KKK anti-black rally, but . . . it began with a torchlight parade around a synagogue. Racism and anti-Semitism: twin sins that won't go away.

Until Saturday, the terrorist of the week trophy went to the Florida mail bomber, a true Renaissance man who managed to combine his hatred of blacks and Jews along with gays, Democrats, and the media, a melting pot of hate.

I am so broken, so sorrowful, that I can't yet focus on the big picture. I want to keep it right here, you and I, personal. I beg you to personally be a bulwark, a dam, against those twin sins. Slurs, insults, jokes. We hear it, we know it, sometimes outright, sometimes code words and dog whistles; but we know it when we hear it: racism and anti-Semitism.

No more kidding ourselves. No more offering excuses. No more nervous laughter or awkward silence. *Stop it.* At school, at work, at the club. At the Thanksgiving dinner table. *Stop it.* Speak up. Walk away. Intervene. Show disgust. Let it register. Let it be known.

What makes Fairfield Fairfield? I've been here a generation, and when I got here, all I heard about was The Fairfield Store. It doesn't exist anymore. It was already closed, but the empty hulk of a building space reminded everyone of what was once a centerpiece. Now it's as though it never was.

For me, it was more Mercurio's. Half of you don't know what I'm talking about, but back in the day, Mercurio's was not only one of several downtown buildings with its name etched in stone, but when it came to great food, homemade, it was also the best. It was Mercurio's. It's gone. Barely a memory.

And of course, there's the forever link between Fairfield and G.E. Remember G.E.? I am a G.E. stalker. Born in Lynn, Massachusetts, a G.E. town, I pastored outside of Schenectady, New York, a G.E. town. My first Church was in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where G.E. dominated everything. When I left Pittsfield to come here, my Pittsfield people asked, "Why are you moving to Fairfield?" I said, "I've spent my whole life where G.E. people got laid off. I figured I'd go to where they made the decision about whom to lay off!" Now they are gone.

Three cornerstones of Fairfield that we couldn't imagine doing without, and we are doing without, good or bad. Time marches on. Some things last. Some don't.

What if our Church went the way of Mercurio's? The Fairfield Store? G.E.? Would it matter? Would anyone care? Not to be crass, but, O.K., our thousand members would be sad. Maybe another thousand Church alumni scattered across the country, kids who grew up here, retirees who moved south; maybe a couple hundred around town would lament. That leaves about 48,000 people who would be "ho-hum."

We live in a historic district. So nobody could touch the outside of our building. As long as we still had a lighted steeple and the blue front doors, most wouldn't care if it was an art gallery, a trendy restaurant, or a country store. Who needs a 300-year-old Congregational Church anyway? Seriously.

When I was in college, from time to time I'd get out of bed on a Sunday morning and go to Church. Not often. But I did. Not because I was so great (you've heard enough of my stories to kill that idea), but still, from time to time I felt compelled to go to Church. Whenever I did, 100 percent of the time my friends would say, "I don't need Church, I can worship outdoors in the backyard." So true. But they never did. Not ever. Not in the backyard. Not in the woods. They didn't embrace Brother Sun, Sister Moon, or Mother Earth.

Now, I'm not saying I am holier than they were. I'm just saying I saw the need for going to a building, walking in, and putting myself at the mercy of some old hymns, some ancient prayers, some verses from the Bible, and some preacher's take on those verses. I walked into that building with whatever brain cells were still working after a Saturday night at a men's college in the 1960s, and let all the Church stuff happen to me. And it eventually kicked in.

So, yeah, I believe in Church. I believe what we just we sang in that hokey old hymn, written by our very own famous Timothy Dwight in 1801, just after being our Church pastor for 12 years:

*I Love Your Church, O, God
On earth your blest abode*

So did Jesus. He set in motion the idea of Church, the idea of people gathering on a regular basis, immersed in such love that the Church was called "The Bride of Christ." Yes, put all those marital terms to work: We are his other half, we are his soulmate, we are his life partner, we are his spouse. St. Peter lays it on even thicker: We are a "Royal Priesthood, a Chosen People, a Holy Nation."

To put it more mundanely, when it comes to institutions and organizations and voluntary associations, we are the top of the heap. We're supposed to be pretty doggone good. I'm not saying we lived up to that, I'm just saying that was Jesus's intention. We, us, the Church, joined at the hip with Christ. Or to use another marital term from the Bible, "The two become one and cleave to each other, husband and wife." Or another, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." That's "high Church," high expectations; we, the living presence of Jesus Christ on this earth.

But, as we used to say in New York City, "All that and a buck will get you on the subway." In other words, you need to produce. None of that comes with a guarantee of success or survival.

The first Church I served as a pastor is closed. The second Church is in distress. The third Church is dwindling. My master's degree seminary has gone. My doctoral degree seminary was sold. And so, putting thought and effort into keeping this old Church around and open and alive is not an idle exercise.

I was reading a sports article about the New York Rangers hockey team, a young team, playing poorly, trying to mature, grow up. The players had been superstars in high school, college, minor leagues, maybe too often getting by on natural talent. But the coach said, "The biggest thing as they got older is changing their definition of what trying hard is."

That's true of a 300-year-old Church too. Once upon a time, all we had to do was open the doors. Once upon a time, New England Congregationalists ruled the roost. We need to "change our definition of what it means to try hard."

May I offer an example for you? Let's just say your favorite great Uncle Augustus, in his will, left you an antique wooden pre-Revolutionary War, creaky old rocking chair. Maybe George Washington sat in it! What do you do with it? Really, three options: Sell it. Put it on the curb for someone more interested. Or treasure it. Make it yours. Use it. Well, guess what! Uncle Augustus or Burr or Bronson or Merwin or Banks or Timothy Dwight—all those history makers of Fairfield, they left us this "creaky old" Church. What will we do with it?

The centerpiece of my White Paper is the popular business analytical tool, a "SWOT analysis." SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Our "strengths" and "opportunities" are the most important parts because if we do them right, we'll overcome any "weaknesses" or "threats." For "strengths," the truth is still true: We have a message people want to hear, we adhere to a central teaching of God's love that the world is begging for, and we present it in a Church uniquely positioned to tell it and tell it right.

Our very history and beauty put people at ease, this place isn't intimidating; this very building, our whole setting, these wonderful windows—it's all welcoming. And once you walk in the front door, people find a Church that is not negative, not divisive, not at one extreme or the other, not finger-wagging.

And yet, we are a Christ-centered Church. We love the Bible. We work hard at mission. We believe the Good News. We are a Jesus sort of Church, from life to death to resurrection to all those amazing teachings along his way. We do it all

in a framework, literally a framework that is incredibly open, gracious, patient, and loving.

My “weakness” section has raised a few eyebrows. I write that this is an “old, creaky, uncomfortable wooden building with poor sight lines, an inadequate altar area and choir loft and a lousy pulpit.” Most of which we can do nothing about.

But the weakness I most highlight is our affluence. Don’t argue with me; it’s not an insult! We are a mostly affluent congregation in a mostly affluent town. It just is. But why is that a weakness? Well, affluence gives many in our Church the opportunity to get away: long weekends, holidays, school vacations, summer trips, winter skiing. Our people can get away and do; and the result is that we have no continuity. None. Zero. Not in Church. Not in Sunday School. Not in Youth Group. In everything else in life we want continuity. Here, we don’t have it.

Under “threats,” we have two—two big ones—cultural and political. Our culture, 21st-century American, Western culture, does not prioritize religion, Church, faith. We used to be front and center, but we squandered that privilege, and so we live in a world that doesn’t value Church. If we are looking for outside validation, forget it. We’re on our own, and that may not be a bad thing, but it needs to be acknowledged. Nobody *needs* to go to Church—no societal pressure, no expectations, no family demands. Church is just not that important to the broader world, so it’s dropped down on our priority must-do list. It’s optional, often arbitrary, it’s “take it or leave it.” Church no longer has pride of place in our culture. In some ways, the broader culture is even hostile to Church, openly or subtly. And in some ways we have earned that hostility. And so, Churches and Church life are in decline.

The result is that a lot of Churches can start to look desperate, and desperate isn’t a good look. Attendance declines. Budgets shrink. Program decreases. Property is neglected. Staff is cut. Enthusiasm wanes. Ministry hangs by a thread. That’s what we don’t want to be in 2025 . . . or ever. Christ doesn’t deserve that.

As for the political, it’s all obvious. Partisan politics, uncivil discourse, each half of the country at the other half’s throats. “My umbrage is bigger than your umbrage.” Our politics have become so divisive that, frankly, to write in my White Paper that our politics have become divisive will strike some as political and divisive, and I hesitated to put it in.

But if I’m writing a White Paper aimed at guiding seven years down the road to a healthy and thriving Church, I can’t avoid warning about what could kill us.

We'll either give into division and die or be so afraid of division that we eviscerate ourselves, leaving us equally dead. Our challenge, no, I say our opportunity is to be a Church of the living Christ with a living faith that knows how to love across every great divide.

I thought of this too late to put it into the White Paper, but I may add it. I'd love for us to be a "Church of Reconciliation," a Church that is known, *known* for being the one place where people cross the aisle, extend a hand; where, when you turn the other cheek, you get kissed on it, not slapped. Where respect for each other's humanity is more important than opposition to each other's views; where diametrically opposed bumper stickers fit nicely side by side in the parking lot; where my "Yea" and your "Nay" rhyme.

Our Scripture lesson today is one of my favorites. Before arriving at Greenfield Hill Church, I pastored at four other Churches. How you get hired as a pastor is you get interviewed a bunch of times, and then you get brought in to preach a "candidating sermon" before the whole Church. Not here, but at every other Church I used those same verses for my candidating sermon.

The verses come from a section of the Book of Revelation where Jesus sends letters to seven Churches, seven Churches that were real and symbolic, symbolic of real problems that Churches have faced all through history: They get weak, they lose heart, they lose enthusiasm, they lose sight of Christ, they fall asleep. To one of the Churches, Jesus is pretty direct: "Wake up!" (Revelation 3:2)

Today's Scripture is also pretty direct. Jesus says to that Church, "I wish you were either hot or cold. But since you are neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth." That's very relevant. Lukewarm isn't good in anything: coffee, pizza, marriage, work ethic, effort, a movie review . . . or Church. Lukewarm is, well, bland, passionless, limp, boring. Jesus's statement, "be hot or cold" is his version of "lead, follow, or get out of the way"; "fish or cut bait"; "don't just stand there, do something."

Jesus did not design the Church, indeed, he did not die for the Church, just so we would ease into the sunset, doze into oblivion, drift into irrelevance, be so afraid of our own shadow that we would allow culture and politics to define our fate.

I write in the White Paper, "Divisiveness and its companion, fear of divisiveness, strike at the heart of what it means to be an honest-to-goodness, alive, Christlike Church. As your pastors, our daily responsibility is to bring the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to bear on all our daily life. Some days are easier than others." (page 16)

I also say, and this is crucial, that the real core of these threats, cultural and political, is our response to each. They won't kill the Church. But our inaction, our apathy in the face of each, they could do us in.

We're in the middle of the World Series, and I know that Fairfield is the dividing line between Boston Red Sox haters and Red Sox fanatics, so I hope I can get away with a Red Sox story. *The Boston Globe* had a wonderful article about J.D. Martinez, the Red Sox superstar—43 home runs this year, 130 RBIs, batted .330. It didn't come easy. It didn't happen overnight. What he did was work relentlessly. He made adjustments constantly, he's open to suggestions, he corrects every "flaw," he's voracious in his preparation, he's tireless. (Abraham, Peter. "J.D. Martinez Did a Lot More for Red Sox Than Just Hit a Lot of Home Runs." *Boston Globe*. 3 October 2018. p. C4)

The opposite of those qualities is failure. You work halfheartedly. You rarely adjust. You ignore suggestions. You don't correct flaws, you're haphazard in preparation. You get it: You're lukewarm. You don't make it to the World Series being lukewarm. You don't make it to 300 years as a thriving, vital, important Church by being lukewarm.

I invite you, beg you, to jump on this bandwagon for the next seven years, think through with all of us what needs to be done, what you will help to get done to be a Church worth its name, still alive, still kicking, still believing.

Let's stand and sing our closing hymn, No. 611, "Rise Up, O Saints of God":

*Rise up, O saints of God!
Have done with lesser things.
give heart and mind and soul and strength
to serve the King of kings.*

*Rise up, O saints of God!
The kingdom tarries long.
bring in the day of righteousness,
and end the night of wrong.*

*Rise up, O saints of God!
The Church for you doth wait,
with strength unequal to the task;
rise up, and make it great.*

*Lift high the cross of Christ;
tread where Christ's feet have trod;
come sisters, brothers in the faith,
rise up, O saints of God.*