

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 10, 2019  
Sermon Title: "Church: One Pilgrim's Progress—  
On to 300"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Mark 11:15-17

## Mark 11:15-17

*Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'*

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My first childhood memory of Church is being asleep on the back pew of my father's Church in Lynn, Massachusetts. We moved away when I was 2, so this was before I was 2. But it taught me three lessons: Church is a good place to sleep. Church is a good place to be. Nothing lasts forever.

Alida and I were back in Lynn recently. We tried to find that little Church, but it was long gone—congregation and the building—gone.

We and our Church are sort of the opposite end of that story. As we head toward our 300th anniversary, we are so historic, we couldn't tear down this Church if we wanted to. We are here forever. And you can't really sleep here.

I remember during our 275th anniversary, we did a worship reenactment from the 1700s. I dressed up like Timothy Dwight (never again). I actually preached one of his sermons, and we had ushers with long poles patrolling the aisles like in the old days, ready to prod anyone tempted to snooze. No sleeping here! And yet, like my dad's old Church in Lynn, Church is still "a good place to be."

In Bible study this week we ended up asking, about Church, "What are we doing here? And why?" "What do we come to Church for?" The question was caused by

the same Scripture you just heard, the unpopular part of the Palm Sunday story. Most of us know about Palm Sunday. It was the last week of Jesus's human life. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, people cheered him enthusiastically, hoping for Jesus to lead them to a brighter day, a greater day; lead them to freedom, to faith, to salvation of some sort. *Of some sort.*

Let's be clear: At that point in Jesus's life, nobody knew what Jesus was really about. Not really. Just a few days earlier, Jesus told his Disciples point blank, "I'm going to Jerusalem. I'm going to be killed. I'm going to come back to life."

And the Disciples simply couldn't grasp it. Call it "denial." Call it misunderstanding. Call it naïveté. They didn't get it. And they were the closest to Jesus and still didn't get it. (Luke 18:31-33)

So when the crowd is cheering Jesus, slapping him on the back, waving those palm branches, comparing him to King David, begging him to "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which means "Save us! Save us!" Did they really know what they wanted? Did they think Jesus was the Son of God who could call fire down from heaven and an army of angels to wipe out the Roman Army, destroy the evil structures of the world, and return Israel to paradise? Did they think Jesus was a charismatic hero, another child out of Bethlehem, like King David, who would lead Israel to military victories and restore the splendor of empire?

Did they think Jesus was the Messiah, not necessarily divine, but definitely God's chosen one, who, by force of nature, by force of will, by some unstated authority, by some God-given spirit, would turn society upside down, back to God, a whole new day? Or maybe they didn't think it through it all. Maybe it was just here's this new guy, he's a breath of fresh air, he gives us hope. Let's encourage him and see what happens.

But anyway, after all that euphoria, Jesus walks to the Temple, looks around, and does not like what he sees it all. Not at all. Religion had become big business. Rules and regulations. Guilt, guilt, and more guilt. Who's in, who's out. Mostly out.

And in one of Jesus's rare moments of flat-out anger, in a frenzy of righteous indignation, he destroys the tables of moneychangers and merchants, knocking everything about, and shouting, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people, and you've turned it into a den of thieves." You've prostituted religion, you've warped it, you've poisoned it, you are destroying it from the inside. And he took a whip to everything and everyone.

When we discussed this story at Bible study this week, it got us thinking about several things. What was Jesus looking for that day when he walked into the

Temple? What was he after? What did he need? And what about us? Why are we here today? Why do you show up, week after week?

In my sermon last Sunday I reflected on January 20, Martin Luther King Sunday, as miserable a Sunday morning as I've ever seen: freezing cold, torrential rains, flooded streets. Our beautiful sanctuary was under renovations, closed. We had to meet in the coffee hour room across the way, sitting on folding chairs. If ever there was a Sunday not to come to Church, that was it. But, by golly, a lot of people came to Church.

Why? What do we want? What did Jesus want? I heard some great answers this week. People said, "Church is like a warm coat on a cold morning." "It's a place, a place of quiet, beauty, serenity, peace." "I was looking for something." "Community, friendship, inspiration." "It's home," one person said. "It feels like home" "It's a place where God is front and center," said another, "God is never talked about anywhere else, at least not in a good way. Here it's a good way."

As for Jesus, it probably was much the same. This was the last week in his earthly life, and he knew it. The weight of what he was about to do and how it would happen was heavy, very, very heavy. Sure, people cheered him. But the religious and political authorities despised him. Even his own Disciples didn't understand him. He was about to die, for what? What signs were there that he'd accomplished anything? And so, he walks into the Temple, the sacred Temple of Jerusalem, *the* sacred, legendary, historic, beautiful Greenfield Hill Church of his day, hoping to find a little peace, some serenity, a sense of community, togetherness. He was looking for something, something that would fit like a warm coat on a cold day. A place where "God was front and center." Instead, it was a circus, a marketplace of chaos, more like the old-time floor of the Commodities Market. It broke his heart.

This sermon grew out of this week's Bible Study, that's for sure, but also from last Sunday's first meeting of our 300th Anniversary Committee.

For those who are new to our Church, this congregation was chartered in 1725. That means the British government gave people who lived around here the right to start a Church. That's how things were done in those days. The actual first worship service happened in 1726. So, however you slice it, we're coming up on 300 years. That's a big deal.

None of us was around for the 200<sup>th</sup>, and none of us will be around for the 400<sup>th</sup>, so this is our chance to do something big. Which leads to a lot of questions and ideas. How do we capture 300 years of history? How do we present it? What's important? Who gets a bigger chapter in our history: Timothy Dwight . . . or Alida? What was going on around here in 1725? With the Colonialists, with the

Native Americans, with slaves? What religious, political, social upheavals were on the horizon? How did this little country Church weather the Revolutionary War, the Abolitionist movement, the Civil War, the Depression, the World Wars, the social upheavals of the '60s? And what's lasting? What was true in 1725, 1825, 1925, and will be soon, in 2025? Our dress has changed, our hairstyles have changed, our political loyalties, our music, our economy, our eating habits, our skill sets, our neighborhood, our schools, our modes of transportation, our way of communicating—all changed dramatically, drastically, totally, all changed.

And religion has changed. Not only Protestants, but Congregationalists once ruled New England for most of two centuries. Why do you think there's a Congregational Church across from the town green in every town in New England? Today we have every religion under the sun and every kind of Christianity you can imagine, good bad or indifferent. Mega-churches, celebrity pastors, televangelists, the Prosperity Gospel, Pentecostalism, Revivalism, Fundamentalism. And with all that, religion has less influence than ever. So, yes, change is all around us, and it's not all bad.

Probably half the people in Church today have had some disease, some accident, some problem, that if it happened to us in 1725, it would've killed us. Cancer. Heart attack. Pneumonia. Infection. Birth itself. Fatal then; today, we live. Some things got better.

I got a new car this week. Since you applauded my announcement that I won't be retiring, I felt confident enough to get a new car. If you had sat there in stony silence, I might have hesitated, but since we're going forward together, I figured I'd get a new car. It's a lease; it's the exact same car as my last four leases. The exact same Toyota Camry hybrid, same black color. Except it's better. The seats warm up. Who knew?

And for those of you who carefully watch my politics, you'll be pleased that this car has a feature that any time I veer off too far to the left or too far to the right, it screams at me, grabs hold of the steering wheel, and corrects me back to the center. It's a much better car inwardly, even if it's exactly the same outwardly. A pretty good analogy for our Church.

Our challenge going forward is to think clearly: What is it we want exactly the same, what is eternal? And what should we do better? For those of you with a keen eye, you noticed my sermon title is the same title as my book from five years ago, *Church: One Pilgrims Progress*. I laid out my vision for what the local Church can be when we are at our best. What does it mean to be a healthy, thriving Church in the 21st century? What's at the heart of what we do? What would make us get out of bed and come to Church on a sunny Sunday in summer, a lousy day in winter, or any day in between?

In the book I tell stories about my father and grandfather, their 140 years as Church pastors; I tell a lot of my own stories—from hell-bent youth, to conversion, to pastor. And then there are chapters on the essentials: prayer, Scripture, pastoral care, mission, hope. We do that stuff, and we're a Church. Don't do that stuff, then put a "For Sale" sign on the lawn. *We do that stuff.*

In the final chapter I tell a story about my friend, Father Tomáš Halík, a Catholic priest in Prague. He's in a lot of my sermons and books. Born behind the Iron Curtain in the old Czechoslovakia, he was raised under communism, converted to Christianity, and was secretly ordained a priest. After the fall of communism, Father Halik has become a very popular Church pastor. I've been to his Church more than 20 times. It was packed every time. He's a prolific writer and a profound Christian.

During one of our conversations together, we sat in an out-of-the-way alcove in his ancient Church, talking about Jesus and the people whose lives he changed and challenged. As we talked, I wanted to know why he was so optimistic, so positive about Church. We supposedly live in a "post-Christian" world, Churches are struggling and dying and closing everywhere; the Church in Europe is a shadow of itself. And yet, Father Halik and his Church packed with young people are upbeat. Why? How? He told me two things: one, let loose the talents of your people, especially the young; don't overlook them. Don't be afraid. Two, look for the wounds. *The wounds*, Christ's Church always looks for the wounds. At that, he told me a story of St. Mark. St. Mark was probably the youngest of Jesus's followers. He wrote one of the four Gospels, and he was pretty good at convincing people about Jesus.

"One day, in an effort to undermine the spread of Christianity, the devil came to St. Mark disguised as Jesus. The devil had done his research, and for the most part he'd done a good job turning himself into a facsimile of Jesus. He had the right robes, the right sandals, the right height, the beard, the look, the demeanor, the overall appearance of Jesus. It was all correct, but St. Mark was astute enough to request of this apparition, "Show me your wounds." But the devil had forgotten the wounds in Jesus's hands and feet and side. The devil didn't have the wounds. So Mark knew he was a fake. No wounds. No Jesus. No wounds. No Church." (p. 199)

You know something that hasn't changed since 1725? Wounds. We all hurt. Every single one of us. Some show. Some don't. You fall and break your arm, you wear a cast. Everybody knows. It's obvious. You fall and bruise your shoulder, you wear a sweater and cover it up. No one knows. In each instance, you fell. It hurts. We all hurt. We carry wounds from the past. We face wounds in the present. Wounds await us the future.

For 300 years, people have come up this hill, walked through those doors, sat in these pews, carrying the wounds and hurts of life . . . knowing that this is the place that welcomes and receives, hears and understands, loves and forgives, feels and heals.

That's what Jesus didn't get that Palm Sunday so long ago in his Temple. It's what we strive to give every Sunday in this Temple.

Let's conclude our service with a joyful 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!  
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;  
where Christ's feet have trod;  
come sisters, brothers in the faith,  
rise up, O saints of God.*