

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 31, 2020  
Sermon: The Dark Side of Pentecost  
Scripture: Litany for Pentecost Sunday  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Litany for Pentecost Sunday

based on hymns of the Church

I love your Church, O God, on earth your blest abode.

**I love your Church, O God, whose walls before you stand dear as the apple of your eye and graven on your hand.**

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone;

**Chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the Church in one.**

Christian, we have met to worship and adore the Living God;

**will you pray with all your powers, while we try to preach the Word?**

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord;

we are his new creation by water and the Word;

**from heaven he came and sought us to be his holy bride; with his own blood he bought us, and for our life he died.**

We gather together to ask for God's blessing; to turn to a wisdom surpassing our own.

**The powers that oppress us now cease to distress us. O God, be present with us, and make your will known.**

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Nothing puts a smile on faces like a birthday party. Cakes. Balloons. Candles. And we could all use some smiles on faces, couldn't we? Just imagine you let all your friends gather around, blowing out candles, eating cake, one big happy party! Well, today is the birthday of Christianity. We call it Pentecost. Alida will tell you more about it. But for my mini-sermon, you just need to know that it is Pentecost that jumpstarted Christianity. It came 50 days after Easter.

At that time there might've been 120 really dedicated followers of Jesus. And they were all gathered together when something strange happened, strange and powerful. The Holy Spirit came into their room like a wind and a fire. It

supercharged the disciples. They went outside into the main streets of Jerusalem, so full of Jesus's love that 3,000 people signed up to become followers of Jesus that day—3,000! In one day, they went from a small group of friends to a Church movement, and it just kept growing from there. Bigger and bigger, everybody hanging out together, everybody sharing, everybody loving it!

That's the birthday, happy part of Pentecost. I'm preaching about the not-so-happy part. Not long after that Pentecost birthday of Christianity, things got bad very quickly. One of the leaders of Christianity was killed, St. Stephen, and the Bible reports, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the Church, and all the people were forced to flee. (Acts 8:1-2) The party was over. Christians ran away, hid out, some were arrested, their lives ruined.

For a long time, I've been telling you about my friend Father Tomáš Halík, a Catholic priest in Prague. Just like us, Father Halík's been shut down, frustrating for everybody. He sent me his Holy Week sermons, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, telling what it's like to be preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ online to an empty, magnificent 13<sup>th</sup>-century Baroque Church in Prague with everybody hidden away.

Here are two points he made: first, for a thousand years Judaism was firmly rooted in the beloved Temple in Jerusalem. In 70 A.D. the Temple was thoroughly destroyed, never to be rebuilt. But Judaism was rebuilt, rethinking how to be Jewish, how to do worship.

Home worship, family rituals, spiritual life in small groups, plus synagogues and yeshivas and myriad outlets for faith allowed Judaism to survive and thrive. For those of us who are Jewish or with family and friends who are Jewish, we know how vibrant Shabbat Friday dinners and Passover Seders are, with or without going to Temple.

We can do that, Father Tomáš is saying; and he would love what our Church is doing: Bible Study videos, Sunday School children's messages, online worship. He would have loved our Mission Ministry this week. Dozens of families, in their kitchens, baking and cooking up a storm. Then, one by one, safely masked and gloved, they brought their food to us here at Church, truly like an offering. And dozens more people fanned out from Greenwich to Bridgeport, from Greenfield Hill to Norwalk, taking so much more than nutrition to lots of people. Whatever is offered to God is worship. That was worship, with or without entering our sanctuary.

Tomáš's second point came directly from his life under Communism. For the first 45 years of his life, the first 20 years of his ministry, he lived in a nation under lockdown. Fear of the secret police. Fear of the government. Fear of neighbors

and strangers who could do you harm. Pastors and people prevented from public worship, or restricted, or persecuted.

In that environment, people took their religion underground—just like in ancient Rome, when persecuted Christians worshiped in underground catacombs. In the old Soviet Union, Christians worshipped quietly and privately out of sight. Across the Middle East, Christians have been forced to hide their faith, their Bibles, crosses, and their worship behind closed doors. And nowadays, with the pandemic, everyone is all of a sudden terribly concerned by oppression in China. Christians have been screaming about this for 75 years, and even louder in the last decade, as steeples are torn down, Churches are locked, pastors are imprisoned.

In easily one-half of the world, it's not easy to go to Church, not safe. My friend Tomáš invites us to use the shutdown as a time for empathy. Sympathy is feeling bad for others, like, "Gee, it's too bad about those Christians in China." Empathy is using our own experience to feel what others are feeling. Kept away from our beloved Church, surrounded by concerns and fears that give us pause, worried about being too close, we know that feeling.

We can use our time, our experience these very days and times to feel the difficulties of others. How often have we been told to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes" and see what it's like? Right now, we have a taste of what it's like for Church life to be hampered, to be difficult.

That's what happened shortly after Pentecost. From Christianity's first glorious birthday, an exuberant celebration full of life and hope, from there it was only a short step to being shut down, scattered, persecuted. But instead of that being the end of the story, it was only the beginning. Let it be so for us.

We had a guest speaker at our Church, a Greek Orthodox priest who had been a missionary in Albania after the death of Albania's horrible dictator. As he traveled the countryside, he met an elderly nun, very elderly. She became a nun when she was 80. Prior to that, like many Christians in Albania, she lived her life isolated from her Church, as Christians were hunted, imprisoned, disappeared. No Church, No Church life. But every Sunday, she got out her illegal radio, tuned it to a Church service broadcast from Greece. She put a little piece of bread and a cup of wine on the radio, and when the radio priest took Holy Communion, she joined in.

And when freedom came, she gave the rest of her life to God as a nun. People expected Albania to be a spiritual wasteland after 50 years of brutal Communist rule. Instead, people emerged from their isolation, having been secretly

nourished for years by online broadcasts, homemade Communion, long-distance fellowship, quiet prayer, and private worship. Let it be so for us.

Our final hymn for Pentecost is "I Love Your Church, O God."

*I love your church, O God,  
on earth your blest abode,  
the people our redeemer saved  
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your church, O God,  
whose walls before you stand,  
dear as the apple of your eye,  
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall,  
in love my prayers ascend,  
to serve your church, my toils be given,  
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys,  
I prize your people's ways,  
the sweet communion, solemn vows,  
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,  
to Zion shall be given  
the brightest glories earth can yield,  
and brighter bliss of heaven.*