

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 27, 2020
Sermon: "Change Can Be Good"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Litany

Alida The Church is the Body of Christ.

David: *I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together.*

Alida: The Church is wherever two or three are gathered together.

David: *I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together.*

Alida: The Church is where we come to the table, and do this in remembrance of Jesus.

David: *I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together.*

Alida: The Church is where we do unto the least of our brothers and sisters as surely as we would do unto Jesus himself.

David: *I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together.*

Alida: The Church is where, in the words of Paul, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither enslaved nor free, neither male nor female, for all are One in Christ Jesus.

David: *I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together*

The Jewish people really, really, really wanted a beautiful house for God. They themselves had been rootless and homeless for centuries. Along the way, they had acquired a strong sense of God's majesty, and they wanted a house of God to match that majesty. They also acquired holy objects, which they kept it in a special box, popularized in movies and books as the "Ark of the Covenant."

Finally, the Jewish people got to the Promised Land, settled in, and gave attention to nation building: towns, villages, cities, roads, armies—all the stuff of a functioning stable society. Israel prospered, grew, and at their height, under King Solomon, they built Solomon's Temple, their House of God. It was amazing! Lavish, stunning, extraordinary.

It took eight years to build; they sent 30,000 workers to Lebanon to get timber, the famous "Cedars of Lebanon." They had 80,000 stonecutters, 70,000 bearers or carriers, and they wrapped just about everything in gold. On the day it was dedicated, it was a huge celebration, a gigantic procession, they brought in the "Ark of the Covenant," they arranged for 142,000 cattle, sheep, and goats to be sacrificed on the altar, the priests, the clergy, were about to start worship—you know what clergy do: lots of words, lots of rituals, but those clergy were stopped dead in their tracks! The Bible tells us, "The priests could not perform their worship, for the Glory of God filled the Temple." (1 Kings 8:11)

What's the old saying? "Man proposes, God disposes." Or, "If you ever want to see God laugh, tell him your plans." The Israelites had done everything right—plans and buildings and an extravaganza, and God just took it over. That's been happening to us a lot lately, hasn't it? Lots of plans out the window. Lots of changes. Lots of "Plan B's."

You know, I love our little Church sanctuary. It is so picture-perfect New England bare-bones simplicity. So cute, so quaint, so . . . off-limits for public worship for so long. Which has made me learn a thing or two. I've been doing Confirmations for 50 years, but now my favorite is this year's, out in the Memorial Garden. And my favorite worship memories have been these outdoor Sunday services out in front of the Church. We are actually talking now about doing some Christmas Eve services outside. We'll let the clergy step back and the "Glory of God" take over.

Jesus never mentioned Church, indoors or outdoors. He went to synagogue. He went to Temple. When Christianity began to grow, people met by the river, by the seashore, in people's houses. The term "Church" has its roots in the word for gathering or meeting place. Our own historic Church is located on Meeting House Lane. Across New England, those old Churches are more often called meeting houses. Nothing ever too fancy—look at us after almost 300 years: a simple, plain, square wooden box. But still, we've had a good idea of the right way and the wrong way to do things.

Do you know that New England Congregationalists even have their own "light bulb" joke? "How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "What? Change the light bulb? My great-great grandmother gave that light bulb!" So, yes, we've known how to do things properly.

For much of my life that meant Church was at 11 AM, with four hymns, one prayer, two choir pieces, an offering, and a 30-minute sermon. Right up to early March, worship in this wonderful Church wasn't much different in scope from 30 years ago, 50 years ago, 100, maybe shorter, that's all.

Then Covid came along, and we had to pivot really quickly. Suddenly, overnight, we had to rethink being a Church. What's important? What's necessary? And one big question: how? How do we have worship? How do we have VBS? How do we have youth groups? How do we have singing, offering, seating?

I remember on one of my visits to Africa, I was being driven in a Land Rover from the capital city of Kinshasa to a large grand Church on the outskirts, where I was to be the guest preacher. Along the way I saw a group of Christians, the Salvation Army, holding Church outdoors in a field. Some sitting on the grass, some on plastic chairs, people fanning themselves, some enjoying the shade of a tree. And I thought, how sad! How sad to have to have Church outdoors. The Church needs a building, right?

Now, here we are. Having worshipped outdoors for two months, loving it, wishing we had thought of it back in late April or early May. That's been one big takeaway for me. To think about not what's cultural, not what's traditional, not what's always been that way, but what's needed. That little Scripture litany we just did is built on a little chorus from a children's hymn: "I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together." That's the response I did after each little Scripture Alida read: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name," promised Jesus, "I am there." "Do it in remembrance of me," he said. "And when you do good for the least of people, the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the hurting, you are doing it for me directly."

If God, acting through Christ is the purpose of our worship, then whatever places us alongside Christ is worship. Worship exists to put us close to God, to focus our attention. So Jesus says fine, focus your attention. On me. And on each other. "I am the Church. You are the Church. We are the Church . . . together." It's the "together" part we've worked hard on, bringing us into a whole new way of "being Church."

We've had our Sunday worship online for a couple of years. One Sunday, just before Covid hit, we had 11 "views." Eleven people in the entire universe clicked onto our service. Two weeks ago, we had 3,200 views! And people comment. They send us emails afterward. They pop up little "I love you" heart and "clapping hands" applause emojis. People tell us they sing along, pray along; and we know you send in your offerings. Somehow, through the Cloud, over the Internet, online, we are still together.

A huge change for me has been baptism. I've been baptizing people since 1968, mostly in Church, always in public, always during worship. There was a belief of mine that baptism is part of Church life, that the Church family must be present. You wouldn't have a baptism without the parents. How can you do it without your Church family?

My father and I argued about that for decades. For the last 10 years of his career, he pastored a small Church on Staten Island, maybe 30, 40 people on a Sunday. As soon as Church was over, in would walk a family for a private baptism, a large Italian family, 50 to 75 people. I'd say, "Dad, you could've done it during Church, tripled your attendance, they'd hear your sermon, become connected, put money in the offering plate!" I was so "holier than thou," even with my own father!

Then stupid Covid came, and what do we do? Babies are being born. Baptisms had already been scheduled. Godparents chosen. No indoor Church services for months. The babies are growing into toddlers. The families want to celebrate and thank God. What to do?

So we start having private family-only baptisms here in Church. Or out in the Memorial Garden. The sky didn't fall. I liked it! I had tossed a lifetime practice out the window. Theologically grounded. Ecclesiastical important. Gone. And I liked it.

Same with funerals and weddings. Both were often big events, people came from near and far. The Church would be full, full of tears and memories, of faith and love, with stories and laughter and plenty of food—for funerals and weddings.

Then came Covid/shutdown/government limits on crowd size, travel restrictions. No wakes, no calling hours, no funerals. No wedding rehearsals or rehearsal dinners, no large-scale weddings and glamorous receptions, not even honeymoons. But we still had grieving families wanting a true farewell; and couples in love wanting to start married life. So, small weddings, intimate family gatherings at graveside, three people, five, nine, 11. Just family, the grand-children featured more at funerals, the couple focused more at weddings.

It was as if we all suddenly remembered whom it's for, what it's about. With our baptisms, with our Confirmation, with our weddings, with our funerals, indeed, with our online ministry, with our outdoor worship, we have remembered whom it's for, what it's about.

We're here for God and for one another. It's always about God and one another. It remains as simple as you all said earlier: "I am the Church. You are the

Church. We are the Church together." Those are things we can't forget. Next week, we return to some old ways, Church indoors. We've already got Bible Study meeting, Youth Groups meeting; old-style Church life is starting to percolate. But let's not forget what we've learned.

I'll close with this. Last Sunday afternoon we presented Bibles to our third-graders. Normally that happens in Church, during Sunday worship, puts smiles on everyone's faces, boosts attendance, that's a fact. Last Sunday we were out in the Memorial Garden, all gathered around the magnificent wooden cross. Just the kids, their moms and dads, and the Bible. That's what was front and center. We remembered who we are and why we were there; we remembered whom it's for, and what it was about.

We remember: "I am the Church. They/you are the Church. We are the Church . . . together." It was "the Glory of God." It was beautiful.

Our closing hymn today is "Day by Day."

*Day by day
Day by day
Oh, Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day
Oh
Day by day
Day by day*

*Day by day
Oh, Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day
Day by day
Day by day*