

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 24, 2022
Sermon: What If I'm Wrong?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: The Lord's Prayer

Our Coming Together Prayer (in unison):

We come to church not because we must but because we may. We come to church not because we are right but because sometimes, we are wrong. We come to church not to be on our own but to be among others. We come to church to be renewed, refreshed, and reminded of the love that gathers us here
Amen

Scripture, in unison

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

My Jesus, my most recent book, came out last September, and we've been putting it to work. Our Bible Study group has spent seven months looking at every Bible verse I used, chapter to chapter, to back up whatever point I was making. So there was a really deep dive into the book.

Over 709 of the first edition are gone, including batches of books to Slovakia, India, the Czech Republic, and Croatia. Most fun of all is I sent over 100 copies to young adults who grew up in our Church and now live all across America. So we are using the book as a way to stay connected. And if you have a suggestion for someone to send one to, let me know. Seriously.

Kids who were in the Sunday School Christmas Pageant, who were confirmed here, who went to Appalachia and India with Alida, who got married by us—they are starting businesses, succeeding in corporations, building families, and, as they were in high school, still being pressured to read my books!

a fanciful story about my death, my resurrection, and my disappointment. Here goes:

Chapter NINE
"What If I'm Wrong?"

So, I die. Then I wake up, resurrected, whatever, glad to be alive again. Proud that everything I've preached at 1,500 funerals is true!

Off in a distance I see people being welcomed, reunited, ushered in. That great city, The New Jerusalem, comes as advertised. Twelve gates, each made of a single pearl. Wow! How do they do that? Even at a distance, the brightness is dazzling. You can see for yourself that the streets are paved with gold.

I did it. I lived my life to the best of my ability, I think. I was good, for the most part. Kept most of the commandments. At least I never killed anybody or built a graven image. I guess I have a pretty decent resume. I'm here, aren't I? The Book of Life is just ahead, open to the letter R.

I'm close enough now to see familiar faces, but first, believe it or not, there is some paperwork. But I'm not worried, really. I give St. Peter a hearty greeting, and Jesus the smile of an old friend.

They're not smiling. Or greeting. Or ushering me in.

Nearby, people are grumbling, frowning, pushing to the front but not getting anywhere. Something is awry.

What's he saying? one person asks, looking troubled. What's the hold up? I had a reservation, one yells. I paid for this, grumbles another. Nobody's gonna tell me where to go, I worked hard for this. Do they know who I am? Who do they think they are, for Chrissake? The epithets are growing.

After a while, exhaustion sets in.

Dying can take a lot out of you, physically and emotionally. So drawn out. Everyone overwrought. Indecision about whether it is time to let go, or fight on. Goodbyes. Not so goodbyes. Guilt. People whispering, okay, you can let go now, we'll be fine. The living are trying to be helpful. The dying are trying not to be a burden. It is an exhausting journey.

The upside, for those of us in this clump of unhappy resurrectees, is supposed to be this: here, heaven, the kingdom of God, Paradise.

Peter, a big burly guy, seems to be in charge. Now he starts barking orders, answering questions, shouting explanations all at once

"You, over here!"

"You, there. No, not there. There!" And he points down south.

I catch bits and pieces that begin to explain the delay, if that's what it is. Obviously, some misunderstandings. Also, ominous. People are talking about sheep and goats, weeping and gnashing of teeth, outer darkness. Most troubling happens right near, a woman crying out, "Lord, Lord," beseeching, begging. And Jesus, very simply and very clearly looks at her. "I don't know you," he says.

Whatever is about to happen, that moment captures it all. Maybe I've been wrong.

A little melodramatic, perhaps, this chapter opening."

More than half the world, more than half of Christianity imagines a bad end for lots of people in the afterworld. Islam has a very strong sense of heaven and hell, punishment and reward; an idyllic heaven, a torturous hell.

Hinduism's reincarnation is a very absolute system, carrot and stick. The good guys improve their status in their next life. The bad guys drop down a few notches.

And Christianity and our Bible, we're filled with images of unhappy endings. "Fire and brimstone" come straight out of the Bible. So does "weeping and gnashing of teeth," "Armageddon, the final battle"; and the "Lake of Fire," the worst possible destination; "Sheol," the unhappy place of the dead; and "Gehenna," the eternal fire—all in the Bible.

Much of Christian thinking about the downside of eternity comes from Dante's "La Divina Comedia," especially Dante's "Inferno" and "Purgatorio," his graphic description of most of us who don't make it past St. Peter's Pearly Gates on the first try.

On my first visit to Prague, I came across a little museum showing Salvador Dali's disturbing paintings based on Dante's "Inferno." Each painting shows sinner spending an eternity horribly suffering in ways perfectly designed to match their sins. I had nightmares for weeks.

And if you're a fan of great religious art, from the Sistine Chapel to every museum and cathedral in Europe, you've seen the paintings of Judgment Day. God's finger pointing to some (the few) to the bliss of heaven and the rest (the most) to the never-ending agonies of hellish punishment.

The basic argument for God as the Great Punisher is based on the premise that God is perfect, that God is just, and that God is clear. God has been crystal clear with what to do and what NOT to do. Period, full stop. Lots of "Thou shalt nots." Very clear.

And being just, God has every right and even every obligation to render judgment, to mete out justice. That's God's job. And being perfect, God simply cannot, will not stomach imperfection.

My childhood hero was Ted Williams, baseball's greatest hitter, and a war hero twice over. He was the best. But he was a lousy manager of mostly lousy players.

It was said that he was so good that he couldn't imagine, he couldn't relate to lesser players. He couldn't abide anything less than excellence. How do you *not* give 100 percent? How do you *not* try harder, get better? How do you *not* expect to excel?

I have a dear friend with the most wonderful mother. And the mother had a totally, thoroughly, perfectly white living room. Everything white. We were not allowed in, at all, ever, no way. Not our dust. Not our mud. Not our lint. Not our spillage. Nothing about us was allowed in a place designed for perfection.

That's how some see heaven. Heaven is perfectly heavenly. Hell is perfectly hellish. And people want to avoid hell at any cost.

In my younger career I took over a dying church. My task was to rebuild it. One day, a family walked in for worship. A large family. Three generations. Filled three pews. That's how you build a church. After a while, they disappeared, so I got in touch. "What happened?" I wanted to know.

"The blood," the mother told me. "You don't preach the blood of Jesus enough. Without the blood, my family won't be saved and won't be with me in heaven. I can't risk that. Eternity is forever."

Eternity *is* forever. So I'm preaching love to get you into heaven. And others preach fear to get you into heaven. What if I'm wrong? Well, I take that seriously.

The Bible does talk about punishment. Noah's flood wiped out the whole earth, Sodom and Gomorrah killed two whole cities. Jesus talked about his way being the "narrow way," with a small gate.

And the little story I started this sermon with correctly quoted Jesus saying to folks, "I don't know you."

My answer to this is also Biblical. In the Lord's Prayer we said a few minutes ago, the Lord, Jesus, tells us to begin, "Our Father . . ." Jesus goes even further, inviting us to think of God in a more intimate way, as "Daddy." Our "Heavenly Father," or spiritual "Daddy," and then turns around one day and tosses us into a punishing purgatory or eternal hellfire of damnation? That's not fatherly or Daddy-like or familial . . . Or Christlike.

Sticking with this family image, I'll tell two other stories about my parents. My father, my beloved father, was a tough taskmaster. Like God, my father had high standards, impossibly high standards. Jesus said, "Be ye perfect, even as God is perfect." Well, Jesus and I must have had the same father. With them, there was perfection. Or flunking. Indeed, there was perfection. Or punishment.

My father wasn't a physical punisher. He lectured. For hours, even days on end. He could lecture me all night long. Or stop mid-sentence at midnight and begin the next morning exactly mid-sentence where he left off.

And like Jesus, my father also had a narrow gate. An impossibly narrow gate. Of course, the beauty of a narrow gate is there's not much to it; it's not complicated. Do this, you're in. Don't do this, you don't get in. With my father, the "do this" list was narrow, tight, brief. *Read books. Play baseball. Go to church.* Repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

The other image is my mother. My mother was the quintessential 1950s Swedish mother. Demure, perfect, quiet, controlled. Never an outburst. Never angry. Never a critical word.

Most of you have heard a lot of my sermons and read many of my books, so you know I ran up against that narrow gate a lot, you know I gave plenty of reason for anger, an outburst, a critical word.

My father lectured. My mother? She had "the look." The look of disappointment. With just a slight, slow, almost imperceptible shaking of her head. It was devastating. It broke me.

Between the "lecture, and the "look," I didn't get away Scot-free. But my parents didn't kill me, didn't torture me, didn't throw me into a "lake of fire," or

cover me up with “brimstone” or slam shut the “narrow-gate” against me. They had this annoying habit of loving me.

So what’s going to happen? Who’s right? Is my grandfather right? That some of us, a lot of us, are going to be tossed into the “lake of fire,” and extinguished?

Or is Dante right—that God plans an exquisite punishment designed just for each of us, individually, until we’re sufficiently punished . . . or purged? Or am I right, that my mother, and God, probably in tandem, will cut me to the quick with “the look” and then, when I’m sufficiently humbled, they hug me and welcome me to heaven? Imperfections and all?

Well, back to the Bible. Jesus does say the gate to heaven is narrow, a tight fit, tough to squeeze through. Jesus does say, “Be ye perfect.” Try that on for size!

At that point, the disciples are about to throw in the towel, “Who, then, can be saved?” They ask, with exasperation, frustration, resignation. The gate is too narrow. The standard is too high. Perfection is impossible. To which Jesus responds, somewhat mysteriously, “With God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26). You see, with love, there is always a way.

Now, I’ve been a pastor for a lot of years. I’ve preached in a lot of churches, in a lot of places. Every kind of church, denomination, type, style. You name it, I’ve preached there. So I know what some people think about our emphasis on love.

“Oh, that’s the easy religion, that’s Liberal mumbo-jumbo “why can’t we all get along” new-agey stuff.”

Well, the new-agey stuff is 2,000 years old; and yes, why can’t we get all get along?” And as for “easy”—really?

Love is easy? Back to the Bible. Jesus says, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself, and love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

How are you doing so far? One out of three? Two out of three? All three? Good for you! Let’s add some more Biblical loves. Love your enemies. Love the stranger. What about “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things . . . Love never ends.”

Easy? Easy religion? Telling people to go to hell, that’s easier. Turning your back. Hating on someone. Giving up: all easier than limitless love.

I put this test in the chapter. Think of some people you can’t love. Somebody who has hurt you. Done you wrong. Or hurt someone you care about. Forget

Hitler and Putin; none of us is going to be sitting at a table with them, trying to figure out how to get along. I'm talking about our daily lives, our regular lives, people we have to deal with, run into. And now imagine what it would take to love them. Does that sound like easy religion? Or is that what put Jesus on the cross? *Love.*

So, yeah, a lot of people are trying to avoid "fire and brimstone." Me? I'm trying to avoid another lecture and "the look." Whatever motivates you, go for it. But whatever ending you're trying to avoid, the way to avoid it is *Love.*

So here's my advice to you, in person or online, you find a church that hammers home about love nonstop, that preaches love ad nauseam, that lives love ad infinitum, that sees love on the cross, love in the empty tomb, love in the manger, that is so focused on love, that everything else fights for second place.

You find a church like that—stick with it. You won't have to worry about "What if I'm wrong?"

Our parting hymn today is No. 339, "Just As I Am, Without One Plea, No. 337

*Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, and waiting not
to rid my soul of one dark blot,
to thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*