

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: June 19, 2022
Sermon: "Celebrating Dads and Grads"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: The Lord's Prayer

Our opening hymn today is "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," No. 2 in your Hymnal

*Joyful, joyful, we adore You,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before You,
Op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!*

*All Your works with joy surround You,
Earth and heav'n reflect Your rays,
Stars and angels sing around You,
Center of unbroken praise;
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flow'ry meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain
Praising You eternally!*

*Always giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blest,
Well-spring of the joy of living,
Ocean-depth of happy rest!
Loving Father, Christ our Brother,
Let Your light upon us shine;
Teach us how to love each other,
Lift us to the joy divine.*

*Mortals, join the mighty chorus,
Which the morning stars began;
God's own love is reigning o'er us,
Joining people hand in hand.*

*Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music leads us sunward
In the triumph song of life.*

Scripture, said together: *The Lord's Prayer* from Matthew, Ch. 6

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 for ever. Amen

Sermon: "Celebrating Dads and Grads" *David Johnson Rowe*

My grandfather was a master carpenter up in Mechanic Falls, Maine. He thought working with your hands was a poor man's job, so he refused to let my father ever touch his tools. So my father grew up knowing nothing about carpentry: how to pound a nail, cut a board, or make anything. Instead, my grandfather emphasized books, learning, education, and my father became a lifelong scholar.

My father passed down his ignorance of work with his hands, so I'm useless when it comes to fixing, making, or building things. But my father did pass down that love for books, reading, and education.

So on the one hand, I'm a lifelong ignoramus. On the other hand, I'm a lifelong scholar. On Father's Day, what we call "Dads and Grads Sunday," that's a useful lesson. Each generation passes down its strengths and weaknesses, its beliefs and prejudices, its passions and ignorance. To Dads, I could say, "Be careful what you pass along." To Grads, "Be careful what you pick up."

"Dads and Grads," I like that, having done both, a lot. I remember when I got my Doctoral degree, I said to myself, "I'll never have to take another test until Judgment Day." Little did I know at age 30 that when you reach 50, your whole life is one big, endless medical test. There are days when I don't even know which test I'm having or why.

Still, graduation should fill you with a sense of completion. Not that many years ago, if you were reading an obituary of an older man, it often reported, "His proudest accomplishment was that he put all his children through school." Graduation is a family affair, a family accomplishment, a family pride. Enjoy it. Because, well, two things:

A. Sometime around late August, you grads start all over again, except that everyone you live with is a stranger. No one is waking you up in the morning or doing your laundry or cleaning your room or feeding you. You have graduated to . . . a whole different world, which brings me to point B: What a world! What a mess! Thank goodness you have four years in college before you really will have to stand smack dab in the middle of the real world.

Not that today's mess is unique. I graduated in the 1960s. The height of the Vietnam War. The struggles for civil rights. The assassinations of great leaders. The world looked bleak.

Or imagine graduating in 1941, just as happy and proud as today's grads. But those boys were soon off to war, those girls were soon on the assembly line, those parents were in constant fear and sorrow. Every generation faces extraordinary times and powerful challenges. And every generation can learn from earlier generations the simple lessons: You can do it. You can face it. You can overcome it. You can make it better.

A lot of people think that one of the great benefits of religion is to remind us of the "big picture." Our religion begins with the creation of the universe, that's a big deal, and that puts everything in perspective: time, place, events, people. And then much of religion points toward eternity. It's all a way of saying that we are part of something much larger, much longer, much broader and deeper than we can grasp at any given moment.

Christianity is 2,000 years old. Judaism is 5,000 years old; Buddhism and Hinduism are even older. Our Bible includes lists of "begats" and generations to emphasize that. This person begat that person, this group transformed into that group, this idea became that idea, this place moved to that place. That's the movement of eternity, always moving.

Yet, as the book of Ecclesiastes mentions, "There's nothing new under the sun." Ruin. Tyranny. Plagues and Covies of various kinds. Refugees and immigrants. "Wars and rumors of wars." "Man's inhumanity to man." Greed, corruption, immorality. Whatever your greatest fear or pet peeve, it's all there in religion, in history, in the Scriptures. In part to say, you can get through it. Others before you did it. You can do it.

Which brings me to Dads. We can all agree that one of the main purposes of Dads is to embarrass and annoy. Why do parents go to Parents' Weekend at college? To all their kids' games . . . and practices? If you ask my kids, grandkids, and nieces what I offer, it's the uncanny ability to embarrass and annoy. Come on, Dads, admit it: we love it! And kids? Admit it: you love it. So we'll keep doing it.

And is there anything more annoying than how Dads are always giving advice, always comparing their days to your days, their music to your music, their trials to your trials?

But once we get past the obvious, that, yes, Dads are annoying, willfully annoying and embarrassing, I would argue, indeed, my family would tell you I am getting even better at it.

But once we admit that, let's also admit sometimes Dads are right. The elders are right. All those old codgers, the "over-the-hill gang"; those "has-beens," Gramps, Papas, Opas and Das; those gray beards, bald heads, wizened and crinkled faces—sometimes we're right.

There's an insurance ad that catches my eye. A younger person comes in with some outrageous insurance claim, but the insurance agent is totally unfazed and promptly takes care of it. "We know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two," the agent declares. That's part of being a Dad. We may deliver our knowledge in embarrassing and annoying ways, but it's still knowledge. *We know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two.*

After 9/11 our little corner of America was really panicked. It was the worst anybody could imagine. Parents, children, politicians, businesses, churches, we were all in an uproar. What was the world coming to? People were discouraged, depressed.

You remember those days? War was on the horizon. Travel was shut down. Weddings were canceled. Sports canceled. People told me they wouldn't have children. We were afraid of the future. Then I went to The Watermark, the Senior Residence on Park Avenue in Bridgeport. I've been doing worship and Bible study and classes there forever, so it was my regular turn, and I went, not knowing what to expect.

Later, I did the same thing at the Bigelow Center for Senior Activities here in Fairfield. All those old Dads, all those old people, all those somebody's parents, somebody's grandparents, our Town's and our Church's elder citizens—I went prepared for fear . . . anger . . . discouragement. Instead, I met hope. I met the wisdom of age. I met experience, knowledge. I met perspective. I met "been there, done that." Or more accurately, "been through that." They'd been through Depression and recession, wars and catastrophes, the deaths of parents, children, siblings, and spouses. They knew the challenges of daily life at its worst, and what it means to get up the next day and put one foot in front of the other, to look forward.

So when Dads tell grads how to maneuver life, how not to let setbacks set you back, about stiff upper lip, "keep calm and carry on . . . put your shoulder to the wheel . . . sit up straight . . . look `em in the eye . . . show up on time . . . be prepared . . . listen . . . if at first you don't succeed . . . never, never, ever give up . . ." Sure, that's annoying. It's still right.

One day, Jesus's disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. They had noticed how prayer strengthened Jesus, guided him, motivated him. "We want that," they said, "so teach us how to do it." And what was Jesus's answer? "Okay," he said, "start like this: Our Father, who art in heaven."

Interesting way to begin. "Our Father." The Bible is full of names and images and phrases for God: descriptions, qualities, characteristics. God is King, Judge, Lord. God is love, spirit, creator. God is wisdom, Alpha and Omega, almighty. God is Shepard, Lily of the Valley, Redeemer. God is rock, refuge, and truth. One thousand names and titles in all.

But Jesus says, "Why don't you start with this: "Our Father, who art in heaven."

Don't get wrapped up in all the gender stuff, we unwrapped that on Mother's Day. God is all these thousand names and more. God is male and more. God is mother and more. And among the "more" is "Father." The best that it means to be a father. The best that it takes to be a father. The best a father can be. The best we want and need from a father, that "father who art in heaven" loves you like the precious, beautiful, special child you are.

God is the wisdom of the ages. God "knows a thing or two" because God "has seen a thing or two." God does have some tried and true ideas that just might help you through life. God may well annoy you from time to time, may well embarrass you. May well take your keys away, put you in time-out or ground you. May well tell you stories of the good old days and how it used to be, may well seem out of touch, forgetful, or unrealistic.

But the "father who art in heaven" helped give you life, helped steer the course of your life, loves you every step of the way, never turns on you, never gives up on you.

When I was 6 years old, I visited my old grandfather up in Alton, New York. We were playing catch in the yard when my grandfather stopped, walked away, went down in his basement, and came back with old-time catcher's equipment. From the 1930s. Old-time shin guards, chest protector, facemask, an old-time oversized catcher's mitt. He put it on me. Made me squat and started pitching at me. That changed my life. Being a catcher. Playing baseball. Guiding a pitcher. Running a game. On top of everything.

That gave me direction and motivation for life. How to be a teammate. How to lead. How to organize.

Yes, sometimes the old man, Dad or GrandDad, is right. So it was, 13 years later, and my grandfather knelt down on the floor next to me sitting in a chair, and he prayed for God to take hold of my life and turn me around, make something of me . . .

I got it. There was a connection. Credibility. Trust. Love. The same love that made a catcher. Well, that same love saved my soul.
