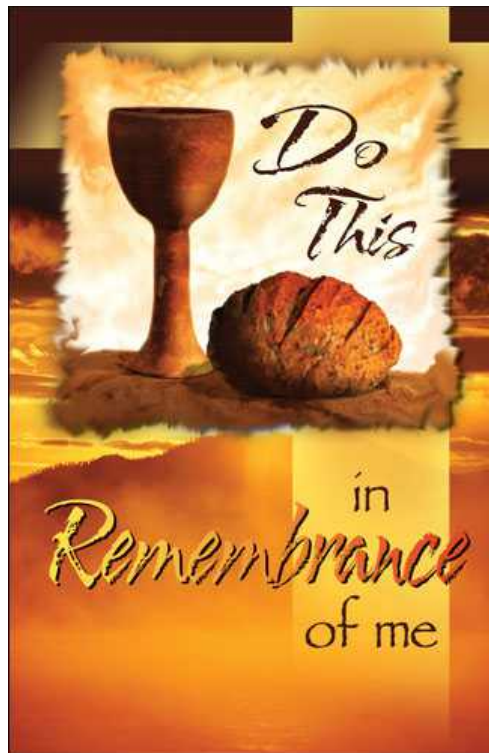


## IN REMEMBRANCE

*Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, October 2, 2016  
World Communion Sunday – Higganum Congregational Church – 10:30 am*

### **Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 11:23-26**

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.



Polls and pundits are constantly in the news these days. Numbers and graphics and talking heads on TV. Graphs and columnists, online and in print. Perfectly understandable, given that we're in the midst of an unprecedented presidential campaign.

There's something else that's been in the news quite a bit recently. Probably not so much on TV (which I wouldn't know, since I rarely watch TV, except for baseball games). Both online and in print and in conversations with colleagues, I've been paying attention to studies and commentary on the current condition of, and future prospects for, religion in America. Or, more to the point, the current condition of, and future prospects for, congregational churches in Connecticut.

On the one hand, the news is not good. The headline of a recent article in the *Connecticut Mirror* says it all: "Historic Congregational churches struggle for survival and revival."<sup>1</sup>

Here's the bad news: "Though still the state's largest Protestant denomination, the United Church of Christ, of which most Congregational churches today are a part, has seen a decline from 110,000 members just two decades ago to about 63,000 today. The number of churches in the state has fallen from 267 to (a still-impressive) 237 over the same period, but a fourth of those cannot support a full-time pastor."

In some ways, the news in this particular community, Haddam and Higganum and East Haddam, is even worse. According to the article in the *Mirror*, on any given Sunday morning, about twenty-five percent of the adult population in Connecticut can be found in church. According to my colleague John Westerholm, senior pastor of Valley Bible Evangelical Free Church, the combined population of Haddam and Higganum and East Haddam is 18,000. Of that number, on any given Sunday, only 1,000 people can be found in church. That's only six percent of the population.

There are numerous explanations for these trends of the past two decades. The rise of the "nones"--those who have no religious affiliation. The rise of the "dones"--those who had been active in their congregations while their children were in school, but after their kids were confirmed or graduated from high school, were "done" with church. The increasing popularity of Sunday morning sports. The popularity of "spirituality" as opposed to "institutional religion": as in, "I'm spiritual but not religious."

But here's what's most interesting about these recent trends: There are three common "reasons people list for leaving religion.... Those who have 'stopped believing' in a tradition's teachings are now at 60 percent, those from families that were not very religious are at 32 percent, and those who left because of 'negative religious teachings' about LGBTQ people are at 29 percent."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://ctmirror.org/2016/09/19/historic-congregational-churches-struggle-for-survival-and-revival/>.

<sup>2</sup><http://religiondispatches.org/theyre-not-coming-back-the-religiously-unaffiliated-and-the-post-religious->

Think about this for a moment. Almost two out of every three people who have left their church (or synagogue or mosque) have left for the simple reason that they no longer believe in their religious tradition's teachings and practices.

Here's an interesting Jewish perspective on the rise of the "nones" who no longer believe in their tradition's teachings. It's written by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, who is the spiritual leader of a congregation in Florida.

"Next time you have the opportunity, thumb through the Jewish Bible — the Torah.

You will discover that there are...613 commandments.

And yet, not one of those biblical commandments tells you to believe in God.

There is a deeper commandment, though – and one that shows up no less than 169 times in the Torah.

It is the commandment to **remember**.

Memory is not the same as nostalgia. Nostalgia brings with it no positive action, other than to passively remember and to feel wistful.

But, for Jews, the act of [remembering] means that we must engage with the Jewish past, create a Jewish present, and pray for a Jewish future."<sup>3</sup>

Let me translate this into a Christian framework, which is especially appropriate on a communion Sunday. "For Christians, the act of remembering means that we must engage with our Christian past, build a Christian present, and envision and pray for a Christian future."

For me, the most powerful words in the entire communion liturgy are these: Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." I'm totally not into theological debates about transubstantiation or consubstantiation. What I try to emphasize every time I preside at a communion service are these words of Jesus: in remembrance of me.

As much as I appreciate Rabbi Salkin's point about remembering, I think he has set up a false dichotomy between believing and remembering. They are intertwined, not independent, not opposed to each other, but complementary and interdependent. For instance, when we do things in remembrance of Jesus, not only breaking bread at his table, but also telling his stories, remembering helps us clarify what we believe.

As one author recently pointed out, for those first-century folk who knew Jesus first-hand, he was far more **relational** than he was **theological**. "His guests at the table, the people he encountered on the hillsides and in the streets, and his disciples had that [sparkling] moment in the history of the planet to share space and time with him."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>[http://religionnews.com/2016/09/26/american-religion-survey-nones/.](http://religionnews.com/2016/09/26/american-religion-survey-nones/)

<sup>4</sup>[http://johnpavlovitz.com/2016/08/09/christian-heres-why-your-theology-is-overrated/.](http://johnpavlovitz.com/2016/08/09/christian-heres-why-your-theology-is-overrated/)

What they remembered about Jesus were the words he spoke to them as their teacher, the parables he told, the meals he shared with them, the compassion he provided, the wounds he healed, his own unjust suffering, his remarkable resurrection. That was their daily bread.<sup>5</sup>

Let me suggest to you this morning that remembering Jesus is just as essential to the church of the twenty-first century as it was to the church of the first century. Remembering Jesus can be our daily bread, in these challenging times to be the church together. To gather in remembrance of Jesus. To tell stories in remembrance of him. To break bread and baptize in remembrance of him. To welcome the stranger in remembrance of him. To embody love of neighbor in remembrance of him. And, in so doing, to believe that Jesus is the “real deal,” the embodiment of what it means to be fully human.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.