

# Second Congregational Church of Greenwich

*Conversation, Celebration, Community - Of Faith*

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July 31, 2019

Dear Friends of Second Church,

Last week, *The Atlantic* ran a piece describing the meteoric rise and surprising decline of The Sunday Assembly, which (if you haven't heard of it) has sometimes been described as "Church for Atheists."

Started initially in jest by two British comedians in 2013, The Sunday Assembly quickly grew serious, as its founders came to recognize a genuine void in the lives of many people that seemed answerable, largely through the simple power of gathering. At their height, these gatherings welcomed several thousand people each week in cities across Europe and the United States for thoughtful lectures, group singing (Bon Jovi's "Livin' On a Prayer" was a particular favorite), community service, and the like. Clearly, from the perspective of activities, at least, replicating much of what we think of as "church life" was what they had in mind.

Those who found their way into such gatherings were an eclectic bunch, many of them raised in religious families but who had since fallen away for any number of reasons. Like so many people who find their way back to regular church, including ours, what prompted their engagement in a new community was often the memory of the warmth they had known as churchgoers in their youth: the joy of singing, the support of relationships, the commitment to making a practical difference in the community. At the Sunday Assembly, they felt they found the best of what they remembered, without some of the worst of the damaging narrowness and intolerance found in some Christian communities.

Unfortunately for those who found a home in it, the movement has not lasted.

Some who came seemed to feel that the message of the group needed to be more explicitly **anti-religious** — that what was, is and forever shall be deeply wrong about institutional Christianity needed to be a major focus. It's not hard to imagine them arguing that **this** (and only this) was the "salvation" desperately needed in the world.

Others wanted something very different, or at least more positive in tone, although precisely what was hard to articulate. The ensuing disagreements were hard to discern a way through, although they tried. Within two years, flat out schisms were widely reported — a fact that the religious press found all too familiar, and described in a way many atheists found all too predictable and smug. Perhaps justifiably. When I first heard about it, I remember laughing ruefully, too.

Now I feel sad for them that it's all pretty much gone.

Church person that I am, I'm inclined to say that God was nevertheless at work, even in contexts that understand themselves as explicitly rejecting the very existence of the divine. I recognize most Sunday Assembly-goers might find that patronizing, which I do not mean to be.

The God I've come to know in Scripture was capable of seeing both the decency of many who did not worship Israel's God, and the indecency of many who claimed to do just that. Jesus teaches us time and time again that a true heart for God is different than one's institutional affiliations or superficial pieties, not that institutions and piety are not important.

Not for nothing, the longing that brought people to those gatherings and not to ours is a judgment that the churches should consider carefully—and prayerfully.

If the church tried harder to live into its vocation of love and acceptance, justice and mercy, deeper thinking and firmer convictions, would there be as many atheists, much less their poignant dream of creating a place of their own?

This seems like a question God might be pondering, and hoping we will ponder.

I don't think there are a lot of fist-bumps in Heaven whenever word gets out that another Sunday Assembly has closed.

Like them, we are also challenged to define our own community in an age of distraction and intense but undefined spiritual longing. There is a place for naming what we are against—and a dangerous temptation, too. May what we are against be sin and injustice, ignorance and closed-heartedness, most of all. But I hope we don't relish the chance to hate or deride anyone.

I hope we also come to live out the vision of what we are **for**, remembering always how Jesus did, and that to proclaim him as Lord is not the end of faith's claim on us, but the beginning.

The more deeply connected with the work of healing the world and loving our neighbors we are, the more emphatically we proclaim a Gospel of inclusion and respect we are, the more fully we remember that all people are created in the image of God we are, the more Christ's message and the full import of the salvation he offers will be proclaimed throughout the world.

If and when we truly do, I am convinced that people will be eager to join us, and eager to find their own life in the prayers God's people have been living on for so very long.

See you in church,

*Max*

**The Sermon this week  
is based on Scripture from:  
Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians  
3:1-5a, 9-11**

**If you would like to hear  
past Sermons you can  
find them on our website:  
[2cc.org](http://2cc.org)**



**Coffee Hour** – there is a sign-up sheet in Fletcher Hall for those who would like to bring baked goods for “Sunday Morning Coffee Hour.” We recommend that you bring approximately four dozen bite-size items. The church will continue to supply fruit and beverage.

**You can also sign-up via email [pam@2cc.org](mailto:pam@2cc.org).**

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