

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Date: July 10, 2011  
Sermon Title: Transformations  
Scripture: Romans 12:1-2  
Pastor: Rev. Dr. Alida Ward

It's Friday afternoon, nine days ago. On this, the last work day of our Appalachia mission trip, I am working with a crew of our kids led by Bill Brennan and his daughter Nicole. I've been working with different crews every day – I spend the week of our Appalachia trip as basically an itinerant worker, driving through the mountains of West Virginia to visit all of our 198 participants, who were spread out this year over four different counties. So I go from place to place, to see how we're doing, us Greenfield Hillers, and how we're doing is amazing: everywhere I go I see enthusiastic teens and adults, at work on twenty-eight different homes. Everywhere I go are kids working tirelessly, hammers swinging continuously, and exhausted but patient adults overseeing it all. And in each county I go to, I join a crew for the day – 'cause I don't want it said that all **I** did all week was drive around in an air-conditioned car enjoying the view.

Which brings me back to Friday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, the day I tagged along with Bill Brennan et al. Now, I've already said that all our crews work insanely hard. But Bill is known for taking insanity to another level. Real truth is, he's just passionate to get the work done, and his passion is contagious, and therefore it's his crews who notoriously end up being zealots who stay on the work site way longer than they are required just to get that last piece of sheetrock up, or that last shingle. I could have picked any crew I wanted to on that final Friday;

but I, I picked the Brennan crew to work with. What was I thinking. That bunch was non-stop. After a full morning of crawling around under insulation and hauling wood, I tried casually asking if it was lunchtime yet. “It’s 10 o’clock, Alida,” came the answer. Back to crawling and hauling. I developed muscle aches in places I didn’t know I had muscles. And the crew kept on working. Crews at ASP are meant to knock off work is around 4 o’clock – Nicole and I finally dragged her dad and the crew off the site at 6:30, under duress. Passion we got in this church.

But here’s what Bill’s crew was doing, here’s why it was easy to understand why their commitment ran so deep, why they didn’t want to stop: They were working for a young couple whose first baby is about to arrive, sweetest people you could want to meet. And that couple’s trailer home, where that baby was about to arrive, had floors that you could fall through, walls that you could lean against and go through and a roof that the rain came through. And Bill and his crew—well, they were transforming that home. I don’t how else to describe it, they were turning it into something else completely, transforming it. They’d taken out the rotten floorboards and put in new. They’d pulled down the rotted walls, and put up new studs. And all around the outside of the trailer, they’d pulled down the outside and were putting up new siding, and nobody on that crew wanted to leave before the transformation was complete. And it, it was very cool to be a part of that, worth every tube of Bengay it cost me.

Truth is, I saw transformations all over Appalachia last week. I saw a bare patch of earth transformed into a concrete foundation for a little girl’s room, so that she didn’t have to sleep on the kitchen floor anymore. I saw a house where the wind whipped through the holes in the walls transformed into a place of warmth and comfort and safety. I saw a home with no bathroom transformed into a place – well, with a bathroom. I saw a roof that leaked like a sieve transformed into a shelter where not a drop would get through. I saw houses transformed. But as amazing as that was to watch, the real miracles

were in the people I saw transformed. One evening I sat quietly with a young man, talking about everything he'd seen, everything he was now thinking about. "I'll never look at anything the same way again," he said, and you know what? He won't. He's transformed. I talked to an adult on the trip for the first time, who had tears in his eyes. "How you can see all this and not just want to fix it all?" he asked. You can't. You will now always want to fix it all. You are transformed. And late one evening, watching the fireflies come out, I sat with a young woman who went on this trip as a teen in 1998 and was back to help us lead it this year – she'd flown clear 'cross the country to be with us. She teaches in an inner city high school out west, mostly kids of immigrants, working with those at the bottom of the ladder, the marginalized and struggling. After Appalachia, she told me, I never saw things the same again. It changed me. And I knew that whatever I did, it had to be something to help the kind of people we helped here.

Changed. Transformed. As powerful as it is to see the last piece of tin laid on a new roof, to see a house transformed, well, to listen to the story of a life transformed is what makes me whisper "thank you, God."

Every year the Appalachia Service Project, incorporated, the wonderful folks through whom we've done this trip for 34 summers, chooses a piece of scripture to be the theme for the summer. A bit of scripture for us to carry around in our hearts all week while we serve. And this year, it was what Betsy read to you just a few minutes ago, the Apostle Paul's earnest entreaty to his friends in the little church he'd started in Rome. Be not conformed to this world, he wrote, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Don't be conformed to what already is, he was writing, who you already are, but let yourselves be transformed. Open yourself up to God's transforming power, let the Spirit be alive in you and you will find yourselves renewed. Christ-followers, he was saying, don't just stick in the known and the familiar, don't just stay in the ruts of who they are or what their world is. Christ-followers are open to the winds of the Spirit, ready to allow the breath of God to transform

their hearts, to open their eyes, to change their lives, to renew their minds. Don't be conformed, he said, be transformed. Be the ones who let themselves be transformed. And that, that's what you see all around you on the Appalachia trip. People who have let themselves be transformed.

It happens that that Romans passage was a passage Martin Luther King Jr like to use. Makes sense. After all, he had a whole nation to try to transform, and this was the text he went to time and again in order to say People of faith, Christian brothers and sisters, remember the words of Paul – don't be conformed to this world. Don't be stuck in a way of thinking that tells you things are right as they are, he entreated, don't live in the status quo, don't be part of the hurt, part of the injustice. Instead, let yourself be transformed, be transformed by the God of all love and justice, be transformed by the God of compassion, be transformed by the God to whom every child is precious. In a sermon called Transformed NonConformity, this is what he said: "We as Christians," King preached, "are commanded to live differently. We are called to be people of conviction and not conformity, people of moral nobility and not social respectability. We are called to a higher loyalty, to a more excellent way."

And it's true. When we let God transform us, we are led to a more excellent way. When our hearts are opened to the power of God's transforming spirit, we are led to a more excellent way. The young man who told me that he had been changed, that he would see the world the same way again, well, he had be shown a more excellent way. The young woman whose life was transformed, whose life is now lived among the least and the last, she has found a more excellent way. The man who let the tears come to his eyes as he told me he just wanted to fix it all, well, he was glimpsing a more excellent way. Be not conformed to this world, but let yourself be transformed.

You don't, of course, have to serve in Appalachia to encounter those places, those moments, those God moments in which your spirit is transformed, in which your life is renewed. Those moments are in our lives

again and again and again and all they demand of us is that we not be afraid to let ourselves be so moved, so touched, so troubled, so stirred, that we are transformed, that we are something new, someone new. When the yearning for faith calls to you so deeply that you say I need *that*, that's God offering transformation. When someone else's hurt moves you so profoundly that you want to change the world for them, that's the power of transformation. When anger begins to shift toward forgiveness, that's Christ's transforming love at work. When what you were ashamed to be changes into the person you are happy to be, that's holy transformation. That is the more excellent way.

Do you remember the powerful movie from three years ago, *Gran Torino*? Clint Eastwood played the most thoroughly unlikeable person you could imagine – a furiously crotchety man named Walt Kowalski, who snarled at his neighbors, threw the local priest out of his house, and whose racism was sickening. And then an immigrant family moves in next to him, a Hmong (Huh-mong) family, including a teenage boy, Thao, and his sister, Sue. Walt calls them “gooks” to their faces, threatens them off his property with a gun, and complains loudly about the downward spiral of the country thanks to people like them. But what happens over the course of the movie, you remember if you saw it, is that you watch the extraordinary and powerful transformation of a man's heart. Oh, he resists like crazy at first. But gently, insistently, tenderly, Walt's neighbors come at him again and again with gifts of love and friendship – Thao showing up to help Walt with yardwork, his mother placing casseroles of food at his door.

Do not be conformed to this world's ways, Paul wrote, but let yourself be transformed, and that's what Walt finally lets happen. Slowly, powerfully, achingly, Walt lets himself be worn down by that gentleness, lets himself be drawn into that family, finds himself caring for them, fighting for them. By the sheer power of grace, offered to him through the goodness of this family, Walt is transformed into a man who know, finally, what it is to love and be loved. I watched the movie on an airplane home from India and sobbed my way

through most of the movie, much to the consternation of the people stuck on either side of me. Do not be conformed to this world, let yourself be transformed. Walt Kowalski did.

Truth is, the faith we find ourselves in is a faith of transformation, a faith based on the promise that the old can become new, that the hardest of hearts can become the most trusting of souls, that a world full of mistakes can be transformed into the kingdom of God, that the darkness of doubt can be transformed into the bright daylight of trust, that a tomb can be transformed into the doorway to eternity. We are a faith that offers transformation – and it may come alive for you on an Appalachia work site or in quiet prayer in a pew, but *wherever* it is offered to you, take a deep breath and go with it. Let yourself ... *be transformed*. Amen.