

ASP Commissioning Sunday 2023

In the summer of 1978,
 a couple station wagons pulled out of the parking lot of Greenfield Hill
 Congregational Church,
 with five adults and ten kids (somehow) packed into them,
 headed down to Kentucky
 to be part of a great new mission they'd heard about
 called the Appalachia Service Project.

The trip didn't go entirely smoothly, as I understand it,
 one of the station wagons only made it to Delaware,
 and, once they reached Kentucky, the work turned out to be seriously hard –
 this was no church camp experience with volleyball every afternoon,
 this was rebuilding Appalachia, one home at a time.

But something happened there
 and that little group that went,
 which included Betsy Russell Milicia,
 who is here today to be commissioned again,
 that little group came back saying
oh yeah, we're going back next summer..

This summer marks the 45th anniversary
 of that first trip.

45 years after that first trip later,
 there will again be a bunch of teenagers and adults
 rolling out of Fairfield on the last Saturday in June and heading south.
 Only this time it's going to take six buses and a small fleet of vans.
 And when we come back, seven days later,
 I'll hear from them the same thing that was heard 45 summers ago:
Oh yeah, I'm going back next summer.

Which is, by the way,
 the same thing I heard when I came to this church 34 years ago.
Do you whatever want with everything else, the teens told me,

but we ARE going back to ASP next summer.

The ASP trip is a home repair *mission* trip –
it's a service trip, it's a trip on which we work, and work hard.

But here's the truth – here's the secret –
and it's not much of a secret anymore:
Nothing works for 45 years for thousands of people
unless there's as much **receiving** as giving going on.
You don't go from two station wagons to buses and vans
if everyone every summer is having a miserable experience
thwacking their thumbs with hammers
and getting sunburned on tin roofs.
We are good people, but we're not saints –
there must be something else going on.

There is.
And here's what it is.
On this trip, we're not just fixing up houses.
We're fixing up ourselves.
We're not just shoring up the foundations of a home,
we're strengthening our *own* foundations.
We're not just making someone's trailer home warmer, safer and drier,
we're getting ourselves in shape.
And it feels *really* good.
We're getting *ourselves* in shape.

Here's what I mean by that.
I do not actually mean that spending a week on the Appalachia Service Project
will make you stronger, smarter, and more coordinated.
Don't get me wrong – it might!
A full week of hammering 2 by 4s into place on a handicapped ramp
is for sure going to send you home with at least *one* bigger bicep.
And crawling around under a house for days on end will either make you crazy

or a whole lot more flexible, or both.

So yes, that can happen.

But that's not actually what I mean when I say that this trip gets us in shape.

I don't mean we're getting our arms stronger,

I mean we're getting our spirits stronger.

I don't mean that we're working on our core,

I mean we're working on our *moral* core.

The muscles we're exercising on this trip are not in fact our quads or triceps – what we're exercising is our faith muscle.

We're working our faith muscle real hard on this trip.

And that's a muscle that needs as much attention as the rest of us, in fact, much much more.

And it's a muscle we don't always get a chance to exercise, don't always *remember* to exercise.

And it needs exercising.

It's like this:

the other day when I was down at the Parks and Rec gym,

I was sitting on the exercise bike.

And I mean that sentence exactly as I said it:

I was *sitting* on the exercise bike.

Just sitting.

I had gone to grab my phone so I could watch the final Ted Lasso episode, and instead there was an email I thought I should answer

and then a text I didn't want to ignore

and so there I was just sitting on the bike –

feet on the pedals, yes – but just sitting.

And this guy comes up, one of the great ol' retired guys who's there every morning,

who apparently had been watching me with much amusement,

and he says, "um, excuse me -- just wanted you to know,

the idea is that you actually *move* your legs.

It works much better that way."

Was he being funny? Yeah.

Did I actually need that intervention?

Absolutely.

Without him, I would have still been sitting on that bike texting an hour later. It did work a whole lot better when I actually moved my legs.

And that's true of faith, too.

Faith works a whole lot better when you get it moving.

Faith is a muscle that needs to be exercised to get stronger.

Maybe that's what James was getting at.

You know, James – the guy whose letter Brian read for you just a little while ago –

Brian, who, by the way, is going on this trip with his son *and* his dad.

James said “what good is it, my friends, if you have faith but you don't have works?”

“If you see someone in need, and all you do is tell them, “good luck with that!”, what's the good of that?”

And then he said “faith by itself, without works, is pretty much dead. Useless.” Which is another way of saying “if you don't exercise faith, it's not going to do much for you -- or for anyone else.”

You gotta exercise it.

A week ago, the Connecticut Post ran an article about Paige Bueckers and Ice Brady, two names you undoubtedly already know, two UConn basketball players.

Paige Bueckers is coming off a missed season after her ACL surgery, Ice Brady also coming back from a season missed for a knee injury.

And the article was, yes, about their physical rehabilitation, and the work they're doing to build their muscle strength back up.

But it was also about what they've done all year to keep their faith strong, and to exercise that muscle.

They've gone to church together, and prayed together;

they've read scripture together, listened to each other,
and held each other up in hope.

These are two young women who are admired and revered across this state
for their athleticism and strength –

and two women who have already learned the truth
that faith needs as much to be strengthened as anything else.

All year long, they've exercised their faith muscle along with all the others;
and they've used it to carry each other,
to care for each other.

Paige Bueckers and Ice Brady have shown what exercising faith looks like.
This is what strengthening the faith muscle looks like.

And that's what happens when a bunch of us go down to West Virginia and work
our tails off.

What happens is that it's our faith muscle that really shows the difference.
It's our soul and our spirits that reap the benefits.

And it feels really, really good.

How good?

I'll tell you. But not in *my* words.

I want you just to listen now to the words of three people --
words written for me after they'd come home from their ASP trips.

Here's what one teen wrote:

*"I had lost God out of my life,
but I found him again this week.
I found him again this week
in the faces of the family I worked for."*

Here's another, a longer piece from another teen:

*I did a lot of work this year, Alida, but I'm not going to dwell on that because it
wasn't the most important part of my trip.*

The most important part was what I learned from the people around me.

I learned from my crew, he said, that no matter how important it is to get the

*work done,
 getting everyone included is what really matters.
 I learned to put other people's interests before my own.
 But most of all, it was talking to Beatrice, the woman I worked for
 that taught me more about myself than anything else has in my 17 years.
 She taught me humility, because her very presence showed me what a genuine
 person is actually like.
 She helped me recognize my own faults and made me want to improve myself.
 Most importantly she taught me to be grateful. She said she loved the sound of
 the rain on her new tin roof.
 From now on, I promise to listen to the rain and appreciate the sound of a roof.*

And finally, these words from someone forty years older,
 one of our adult leaders:
*I went on this trip, he said, because God has been good to me
 and I figured I owed him.
 I was willing to give up a week of my life,
 give up my newspapers, my TV, and even my phone.
 I didn't realize that this trip is not about giving up anything.
 I didn't realize what I would get.
 I didn't know that I would get a feeling that I could never duplicate,
 by spending a week living and serving in common purpose with others,
 finding a bond built on love and laughter unlike any you have ever experienced.
 I didn't know about the satisfaction, the joy, of watching each member of your
 group lead the others to accomplish in five days what you never thought was
 possible.
 And I didn't know what I would receive on that final Friday,
 the gift of being overwhelmed by love for the finest people I have ever met,
 whose existence I had not known of only one week before.
 I didn't know that I would experience miracles in my life
 that I never dreamed were there all along for the taking.*

That's what exercising the faith muscle means.
 That's what it means to discover how good it feels when faith comes alive,

when hope becomes real, when love is right there all around you.

So is this all kind of selfish, then?

Is it somehow self-centered to go again and again on a service trip
where our own souls are served,
where our own faith is strengthened?

Is it wrong to go on a mission of healing
that becomes our own healing?

No.

It's why God made us with empty spaces within,
and then set us free in this world to discover that the only way to fill those spaces
is by pouring ourselves out.

It's why God made us with weaknesses that only become strengths when they are
offered up for others.

God made us to find joy as we give joy.

A lot of us in this room are getting on buses next Saturday.

But just as many or more will not be.

We need you flexing your muscles too,
and I mean your faith muscles.

We need your prayers – for safe travels and good work done,
for God moments to be discovered and miracles to be found.

So that, come July 8th, each one of us here
is that much more strengthened in faith,
that much more alive in hope,
and that much closer to the God who created us for just this.
For exactly this.

Amen.