

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 12, 2011
Sermon Title: Faithworks
Scripture: James 1:14-18, 26
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James 1:14-18

But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

James 1:26

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

I've titled this sermon from a poem I wrote with the same name.

Faithworks (James 2:17)

*Faithworks.
Faith works
one word or two, still Biblically true,
not one or the other, both/and
God's grand plan
for spiritual fireworks
the perfect blend of say and do
of follow, and follow through.*

*Faith WORKS
"faith without works is dead,"*

*that's it, that's what James said
faith without works is less than faith
faith less
a loss
a dearth
a death of faith.*

*Faithworks
cause effect
bestfriends
neverends
where faith is at work
what you believe is what you achieve*

*to think it is to link it
God's will and mine, intertwined
no space between Faith and Work
think and do, God and me*

meandyou.

The world is full of surprises. As you know, I was away for a couple of weeks on our honeymoon, and since I got back I've been catching up on a lot of newspapers I hadn't gotten to. On Friday I found a newspaper from April 15, *The Boston Globe*, front page of the Sports section. The Boston Bruins hockey team had just lost the first game in the first round of the playoffs, shut out by the Montréal Canadiens, 2-0. The sportswriter went on the attack: "This could translate into something you hate to see," was one headline, and the writing was all doomsday: "A brick wall, frustration, a Great Depression, simply not acceptable, disturbing, lights out, party over." In case you missed it, Wednesday night the Boston Bruins won the Stanley Cup, convincingly. The world is full of surprises. (Shaughnessy, Dan. "This Could Translate Into Something You Hate to See." *The Boston Globe* 15 Apr. 2011, Sports sec. Print.)

Two thousand years ago, on a Friday night, after Jesus was crucified, Jesus was buried in a tomb. The tomb was sealed; Roman soldiers were stationed there to prevent any shenanigans. Sunday morning Jesus was up and at 'em, alive and kicking, full of vim and vigor, the physical embodiment of God's Good News.

Life is full of surprises. But it takes some doing, whether you're the Boston Bruins or Jesus, whether you are a dad celebrating Father's Day or an ASP adviser getting ready for next week. It takes some doing.

Every year in late June an astounding scene takes place: 120, 150, now 198 people roll out of bed, come up here to the top of the hill, stumble out of their vehicles sleepy-eyed, dragging their suitcases, their sleeping bags, their favorite pillows, already plugged in to their iPods, hugs good-bye to parents or spouse; they check in, find a bus or van, settle in, and fall asleep.

A week later they return, energized, excited, upbeat, inspired, transformed, burdened, tanned, bandaged, hugging everyone in sight, bursting with stories to tell, the glory of God filling every nook and cranny of their souls.

In between, they are linked up with some adults, some teenagers, some they knew, some they didn't; they traveled 700 miles to a whole other world, different cultures different vistas, different accents, different music; they met a family of complete strangers, they tackled problems they had never met before, they crawled among spiders and snakes, they sawed some things, pounded some things, fixed some things, made some things; they ate goodness knows what. All in all, they got to see the world in a new way, America, religion, and God and church in a new way.

The Bible warned us such things would happen if folks really got into religion. "They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint..." (Isaiah 40:31) "The old shall dream dreams, the young shall see visions." (Joel 2:28) In other words, when you join forces with God, you see things in a new way. You get a fresh perspective. And you yourself are refreshed. You're tireless, you're strengthened, you're empowered. That's God's Spirit at work, when we're doing God's work.

On its surface ASP should be something nobody wants to do, and certainly nobody would want to do it twice. Think about it: you drive 700 miles in packed buses and cramped vans, you do dirty work in lousy conditions, eat bad food, get little sleep, then turn around and do another 700 miles by bus and van. O.K., it's reasonable for you to do that for one year. It looks good on your college application. Or, as adults, you do your duty once, because your kid is on the trip. Once. You help out. Once. But no more. People go back three, five, 12, 19 years, and more. Adults go back long after their kids are grown. The high school kids go year after year. Kids and adults adjust schedules, rearrange vacations, miss out on other activities, skip work. Why? Because something happens there. Something happens. And it's in the *doing*.

People rub up against one another. Prejudices and biases get set aside. Fears are overcome. Strangers become friends. Obstacles are turned into triumphs. And it's all in the doing. There are people in the world – you know

them, I know them – people who prefer to sit on the sidelines of life, complaining, mocking, sulking, whining. A pathetic place to live, but a lot of people live there. But then there are the folks who are willing to get dirty, willing to *do*. And that opens the door to God's power in their lives

There is a wonderful little verse in the Book of Revelation. It gets lost in all the mysteries and scary stuff. It's Revelation 3:20. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them." In life, some people open the door to see what God can do. Happily, our church is filled with doers, with people who are curious and active, people who definitely open the door to see what God can do.

That's our ASP team, our Field of Flags team, our youth group advisers team, our St. George's Soup Kitchen team, our Dogwood Festival team, our boards and committees that work tirelessly team – all people who choose to *do*. That's what our Scripture lesson is all about, from the letter of James with its most famous verse, "Faith without works is dead."

Faith,
that sits in a corner,
silent,
passive,
holier than thou,
judgmental,
smug,
self-centered,
self-contained,
isolated,
unhearing,
unseeing,
undoing – that faith is dead.

I had a phone call couple of weeks ago from a young woman. She's a graduate of our FOCI school in India, and we brought her to America twice, for a total of 16 weeks. She was a young teenager then from a very poor family, and when she was here, she did everything, saw everything, went everywhere. Great cities, great museums, great experiences. She spoke in churches and played softball and ate ice cream and went to amusement parks. She was an honored guest at schools and churches and conferences. When she called, we got to talking about those experiences, some great American experiences that opened her eyes wide. So I asked her what her favorite part was, the best part. "Going to ASP," she said.

She's often reflected on that week, about the freedom she was given, the responsibility, the respect, the opportunity. Strangers who welcomed her. People who embraced her. Adults who taught her. Kids who befriended her as she expanded her sense of the world and her place in the world. Something happened there that was good and lasting.

In a few moments we are going to bring our ASP team up here. We're going to pray over them, dedicate them. We are going to thank them for hearing the knock on the door and daring to answer it and being willing to *do*, not just be.

And for the adult advisers I have a gift, a book about snake handlers! Well, not entirely. It's called *The Serpents of Blissful*, written by Bruce Pratt. Bruce is our own Brad Pratt's brother, Jessie's and Lizzie's and Kate's uncle, and he's written a terrific novel set in one of those "hollers" of West Virginia, up on the ridge, down in the valley, set in broken-down houses, in a broken-down town, with broken-down families.

He's got a slice of humanity in there: an alcoholic trying to dry out, a moonshining family dabbling in marijuana, a mysterious snake-handling preacher, a twice-divorced mom trying to climb out of poverty, a couple of families trying to break with their past and forge a better future. There's love and lust and betrayal and despair. And over it all hangs the banner of God's love – the promise of salvation, repentance, forgiveness, conversion, hope, possibility. Each person having a little hope, a little dream, a little mustard seed of faith.

Same as the Bible. Other than Jesus, everyone in the Bible is some kind of broken. The greats, the near-greats, the not-so-greats. From Peter and Paul all the way back to Moses and Abraham, from Ruth and Esther to Mary Magdalene, from King David to Queen Esther, from St. John and St. Thomas to not-so-saintly Adam and Eve, Noah and Lot, Jacob and Esau. Everyone is broken in some way, from time to time. Some choose to stay behind the door, not listening for the knock, locked into themselves. But some open that door, and Christ enters their lives, and they dare to head out into the world doing what they can, doing what needs doing.

Do you read the "Parade" section of the Sunday paper? Last week they had a delightful little article about Phil Campbell, Alabama, a little town not far from ... well, actually, pretty far from everywhere. On Wednesday, April 27, little Phil Campbell, Alabama, got hit by a tornado, hit hard; 16 people killed, most of the town leveled. But then, other Phil Campbells started helping! Phil Campbells, Philip Campbells, Phyllis Campbells, folks from across America and halfway around the world, all named like Phil Campbell,

Alabama. One Phil Campbell is flying 9,000 miles from Australia just to be with other Phil Campbells IN Phil Campbell, helping other Phil Cambellians. Pretty cool. (Solomon, Dan. "A Special Kind of Phil-anthropy." *Connecticut Post: Parade Magazine*. 12 June 2011.)

That's what we do. We're Christians. We are little Christs. Knocking on doors, seeing who needs us to come in and eat with them, maybe fix the kitchen while we're there, maybe even cook or bring the food, or maybe just sit and listen. We can call that "love." We call it "Christlikeness."

Let's do it.