

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: May 7, 2017
Sermon Title: Uphill, All The Way, In A Blizzard!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

There is nothing more annoying for young people than to sit around while older adults talk about how easy today's kids have it and how tough it was in the old days.

Every generation does it to the next generation. With my parents, they made it sound as though in their childhood every snowstorm was a blizzard and they had to walk to school uphill all the way. Everything was always "uphill, in a blizzard, all the way." And they had "chores" to do, "real chores." That's a great word isn't it—chores? It makes it sound as though everybody had to chop wood and clean out the outhouse,

So it is with some humor that every year I tell our Confirmation class how easy they have it. "Now, when I was your age . . ." I start to tell them, and these kids, they're so nice, they don't roll their eyes, they humor me, so I go on:

"Now, when I was your age, I had Confirmation class, PLUS religious instruction every Wednesday, PLUS Sunday School, PLUS my Confirmation teacher was my *father*, PLUS he gave tests, real tests, almost every week, PLUS we had memorization, lots of memorization, PLUS—get this—each kid had to preach a sermon, a real, honest-to-goodness, up-in-the-pulpit, Sunday morning sermon, PLUS we had a parade that we had to march in!

Yes, a parade. We lived in Queens, which has the only purely Protestant holiday in America. It was called "Brooklyn-Queens Day." It honored the founding of Sunday Schools in America. Only Protestant kids got the day off from school. Each neighborhood had a parade, each church entered the parade with floats and marching bands, and at the front, the very front, marched the Confirmation class in our Confirmation clothes, with *huge* white sashes across our chests, proclaiming to the whole neighborhood that we had just been Confirmed. And, I almost forgot, it was all uphill in a blizzard!

So, yes, maybe I did have it a little bit tougher, but for today's young people I think their world is tougher: what they see, what they face; what's around them: the threats, the challenges, the temptations. For today's Confirmands, all

13 and 14 years old, our nation has been at war for their entire lives. Think of that! Their entire lives.

We ended our Confirmation program on Wednesday with the closing dinner and retreat. At the very end we gathered in the sanctuary, had Communion together, and closed with two songs. The first was by an Armenian-American band, System Of A Down, a very hard-edged, very provocative, very angry band, shaped by the genocide of Armenians 100 years ago in Turkey. Still haunted by their horror by such evil, they confront us with evil eerily, almost chanting, "Do you feel the haunting presence, do you feel the haunting presence?" and then shouting, "Liars! Killers! Demons!" The whole song is very harsh, very disconcerting. But that is reality, theirs and ours, and we spell that out; but it's not the only reality.

We took them out to the Memorial Garden earlier in the evening, gathered around the big wooden cross out there, and spoke to them about the reality, the reality of God's love, the reality of our love for them, the reality of this Church, and the love of this Church for them.

Our young people are being Confirmed into something very specific, something very special: this Church—this old, historic, simple Church; this place—what we believe, what we teach, what we do.

Young people, even adults, aren't always sure about what they believe; but they can be sure about what they experience in this Church. A great Baptist preacher, a friend of mine, once told *Time* magazine, "If you have to choose between what the Bible tells you and what your mama tells you, go with what your mama tells you!" That's sort of how we feel at Greenfield Hill Church. This Church is a bit like a good mama. Religion can be tricky and messy, with all sorts of doctrines and stories and ideas that are hard to grasp. But our Church isn't tricky or messy. We're pretty simple and straightforward: we aim to do the right thing, the right way. We call it *Christlikeness*.

I admit it, there's a lot of craziness out there in the world of religion. You and I get up every day and hear about some awful thing that some bad religion led by some stupid clergy did or said. Every day some religion says something mean or does something hurtful, but they didn't learn it here.

When I was a kid, all the mothers in the neighborhood looked out for all the kids in the neighborhood. It was like having 110 mothers breathing down your neck. There was one phrase they used to pull us back in line. They would say, "That's not how you were raised."

When these kids, our Confirmation kids, grow up and move on, and people start talking bad about religion, when they become adults and they are confronted by religion that is a mean-spirited, lazy, hurtful, they will hear that voice: "That's not how you were raised."

These kids, our kids, were raised at Greenfield Hill Church, where the reality of Christlike love is greater than any other force out there. So we ended our Confirmation with another song. Many of us remember John Giannicci, a great blues singer and guitarist in our Church who goes by the name "Johnny Boots." He's moved away now, but he used to play in our Church a lot, and when his daughter was confirmed, he played one of his songs at the service. In the song, like most blues songs, he talks about the bad stuff that brings us down, beats us down. But, like a lot of blues singers, Johnny Boots is a man of faith. He sees a power at work greater than any force against us. And so Johnny sings:

*"We'll choose our path and make it clear
Make it ours, won't live in fear,
Be ourselves, won't give in.
Use our gifts and let our lives begin.*

*So it's all for one and one for all.
Trust in God, break down the wall.
Someday we'll understand,
Find ourselves in the promised land."*

May this Church for our young people be their first taste of the Promised Land.