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Youth Sunday  
Sermons  
April 22, 2007

# Jessica Black

**Faith.** Such a simple word when you're a Christian, right? *Faith.* Sounds like a simple word. But what does it *really* mean? From the dictionary it says that faith is "holding to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of changing moods." To me...that does not define faith. So I'm going to tell you a story about *faith*.

The sun was shining through the trees like it does in the movies, and I remember my friend's mom singing along with the music. I couldn't wait to see the "Welcome to Silver Lake Conference Center" sign that would mark the beginning of an exciting week at camp. Being in a cabin with eight other girls and staying up all night talking and singing songs in the mess hall was just a part of the Silver Lake experience. Just this time, it was going to be different. I was going to be a counselor. I had been to Silver Lake many times before; in fact I had just gotten home from it two weeks earlier. Silver Lake was my second home. The moment I got there in fifth grade I knew this was going to be part of the rest of my life. The way the camp just made me feel so safe and able to express my faith was amazing to me. And as a growing teenager I needed to feel a part of something; and Silver Lake did just that.

As I got there I was greeted by Glen, who was running the conference "The Game of Life," Joellyn, her son Connor, and Sam who was going to be a counselor with us. It was the night before all the campers would arrive and all of us decided to take advantage of the fact that this was going to be our last night of complete freedom.

The next morning when all the campers arrived, we did the usual assessments. As a counselor for the first time I tried to figure out who was going to act what way, and it turns out I was completely wrong about everyone.

Soon after, we gathered in the meeting cabin and did the usual ice breaker games, and then went off to dinner so that the camp staff could introduce themselves and go over ground rules. Though the thing I remember the most was that first night. I was really nervous; and it was so quiet when we all went to bed, I could hear a pin drop. The sounds of the animals put us all to sleep awaiting the next day's events.

As the days went on people started to become better friends and the nights were no longer quiet. I would go to my nightly counselors' meet-

ing and I could hear the girls from a different cabin; there was no keeping them quiet. And I was always thinking, why couldn't they just listen? Is God trying to test me or something? But the reality of it was, they were 12 year old girls, and all they do is talk.

But if you ask me, the things I remember most about that week weren't the activities we did, they were what happened. We had a boy who got peed on by a bat and had to leave to get rabies shots. The poor boy ended up getting sick all night, and the counselors didn't get much sleep because of it. We had a boy who had an earache and couldn't sleep at night, and we had a boy who had a possibility of having appendicitis. As a counselor I was thinking *could anything else go wrong?*

Well, we all know it can. There was a girl who suffered from anorexia and had emotional issues when being pressured to participate in certain group activities. We had cliques, which was a given; and if you couldn't stand kids getting sick, then you wouldn't have lasted the first half of the week. And to top it off, all five of us counselors were sick at some point during the week.

I could see that the kids were having so much fun with all the water fights that we had. And if you ask me, it was an act of God. We would run around buildings and through the shower houses trying to get the boys soaked; and during meals the water guns came out. You could say it was the best week of the kids' lives, but as a counselor I felt so bad. I felt like I was letting my campers down because I couldn't even focus due to the chills running up my spine. I felt like this week was supposed to be so uplifting, but nothing was going right. I was at Church camp, "God Camp" as we all called it, and you would think that everything would go okay, but in life nothing goes as planned. Eventually, all the kids became a family; everyone got along and of course there were the usual disagreements, but they were resolved shortly after.

By the end of the week it was time for the real purpose to really begin. I started to think "this is the part where everything gets better and the fun begins." It was time to build our life-size game board on the baseball field. We'd been stealing supplies all week for this game. We counselors were worse than the kids; we were so excited. Brown cardboard boxes had been turned into mansions and banks. Construction paper was now money or cards that decided what your career would be.

When the game was set it was time to play. And of course like everything else that had gone wrong, it was raining and it was cold. Everything got wet and we were freezing, but we still played. We'd been preparing all week; no way were we just going to stop. The game took forever, but we managed. Everyone was having so much fun, and things really started to turn around.

That night one of boys decided to throw a party in an empty cabin. There were two big rooms combined with a small main room. He put all the mattresses on the ground and got food and a stereo. As a 15 year old

teenager I was thinking this was stupid, but as a counselor I was telling myself, “to them this is so much fun, so stick a smile on your face and pretend to enjoy yourself.” Well, that wasn’t too hard to do. For the first time all week I saw smiles on every one of the kids’ faces, no one was fighting, no one was crying or getting sick. For that hour everything was how it was supposed to go, and I was having the best time. I danced with whoever was closest to me and I ate cake like it was my job.

At that moment I realized, it wasn’t the camp that made the memories; it was the people. It didn’t matter where I was; it was who I was with. These fifth and sixth grade kids that made my life miserable all week made me realize I wouldn’t change it for anything. For one thing, it made for a great story, but I remember that week better than anything I had ever experienced in all my years at Silver Lake.

When the week finally ended, I almost cried watching everyone leave. One by one the group got smaller and smaller until it was just the counselors left sitting in a cabin once filled with smelly wet clothes, and keepsakes from home; it was now once again without campers. That freedom and joy of having no kids that first night was no longer there. It was replaced with the sadness that the best week of the summer had just come to an end, and the realization that I would probably never see these kids ever again.

I have no way of thanking the thirty some odd kids that were there that week, but all I can do is pray for them. To thank them for all the bad things they did to make me realize it *had* to get worse before it got better. To thank them for the most amazing week of my life, which is something I will always keep with me. And to thank them for making me realize that God was there all along, and because of that my faith grew in a way I didn’t know was possible.

Because it doesn’t matter what the definition of faith is in a book. Faith to me is a feeling that overpowers the body and the mind. Faith is tangible, and it affects my life every day. It is who I am when I wake up in the morning, and it is who I am when I go sleep at night. Faith leads me on paths that aren’t yet made, and it makes me realize the simple gifts God has left for me along the way.

From Romans 5:3–5

“We also boast of our troubles, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance brings God’s approval, and his approval creates hope. This hope does not disappoint us, for God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who is God’s gift to us.”

# Kelly Swartz

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Throughout our lives, there are places and people that help us grow and give us the best experiences. These experiences could be exciting, scary, sad or even life changing. These places can vary from being a young child the first time at Disney World with your mom and dad, to a fun afternoon at the beach with your very best friend to graduating high school, and everything in between.

Now let me ask you this: If you look back at all of these instances, wasn't it the people that made the experience special rather than the place? Without your parents, would going on Splash Mountain or Tower of Terror be as thrilling? Do you think it was the tiny particles of sand and the waves crashing that made you laugh so hard you were in pain? Or would the actual structure of your high school change those memorable four years in any way?

For me personally, I don't think it would. I'm sure many of you have gone through these experiences. It may have been life changing, it may not have been. Today I am going to talk about an experience I had that goes far beyond an amusement park, the beach or a school. It was a place of faith—an experience I had three years ago in eighth grade on a retreat with the youth group. For me, this event was life changing and, without my closest friends from youth group, I wouldn't have left with the same experience.

It was the second day at Camp Berea, in New Hampshire with the YUTES. It had been raining on and off when the campers gathered into the lodge down by the lake that evening. I assumed that tonight would be like every other get-together: cheerful, wonderful singing, praying and a person named Ryan lecturing to us about various topics of faith...and just life in general. All of those things did happen; although little did I know that the experience I was going to leave with that night would have such an influence on my life.

Once the campers were all seated, Ryan came up in front, said good evening and asked how everyone was.

I loved listening to Ryan. He had a way of speaking that drew everyone in so deeply to every word. That night he began on a different topic than in the past, which from my point of view was the most important.

He said, "God loves you no matter what. He is the one person that can

love you unconditionally no matter how many mistakes you make or what you have done in the past. He will forgive you. Although the only way that He will forgive you is if you forgive yourself.”

My eyes and full attention were on Ryan as he spoke. As I glanced around the room, many people agreed with Ryan by nodding their heads and paying close attention to every word.

“If you want to follow the path of God and Jesus then I want you to stand up right now and come with me into the chapel. I want you to stand up in front of all of your friends and every single person in this room and follow me and let them know that you are a Christian, and you want to follow the path of Jesus Christ.”

As Ryan left, not a noise filled the room. It was like time stopped. I knew that I did want to follow the path of Jesus although for some reason I didn’t move quite yet. Possibly because I thought no one else would and I was uncertain if I stood up whether anyone would join me. Maybe it was because I knew this was an important decision and I was skeptical of what going to the chapel might mean and how it would influence my life.

Slowly people started to stand up and walk to the chapel, including everyone in the youth group.

My teeth chattered and I had chills walking up the wet pavement to the chapel. As we got in there, I sat on the floor next to my friends. We were all huddled together shaking as everyone sat on the floor around us. In front of us, there was a big Cross.

“I’m glad that you all stood up in front of all your friends and said to yourself, ‘I want to follow the path of Jesus,’” Ryan said. He talked about how you must forgive yourself for all the mistakes you’ve made before God can forgive you. I started to hear sniffles around the room. Before I knew it my eyes started watering and a tear dripped down my face. I was praying to God that He would forgive me for all the things that I have done wrong... and I think that He has.

Soon after, it was time to go back to our cabins. I thought a lot about what just happened. I felt grateful that I forgave myself, and I knew that God had forgiven me too. I knew that I had made a better connection with God and that I was following the path of Jesus.

From the book of Acts chapter 10, verse 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

That night at Camp Berea was extremely significant to me. It was the first time that I had a true faith experience. It was the point in my life that I knew I wanted to grow more in faith and how important it is in my life. I feel that I have done so, but I know there is much more room to grow and an infinite amount more to learn. That experience is what started my journey of faith, and I hope and pray that everyone here will someday experience something as powerful to help you grow in faith.

# Hannah Louys

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**Trying** to write a sermon for Youth Sunday was a very difficult task for me. Although I have written many essays for school before that proved to be difficult, conveying my faith and speaking from the heart was a tremendous but important challenge. It was very worthwhile, however, because in telling others about my faith, I have been exploring it myself.

A perfect example of how I felt experiencing God was in Ecclesiastes, chapter four, verses nine through twelve. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

On two occasions, I have been with the youth group to 45 Spring Street, the Cowles residence, and have felt the presence of God there. The first time the youth group gathered at the Cowles’ house was because our retreat to Silver Lake had been cancelled. We had been looking forward to it a great deal, so to help abate our disappointment, we still got together, just at a different location. There were not particular events that happened in the house that made me very clearly know how God was with me, but the presence of friends. When we, the members of the youth group, got together, there was such a sense of unity and friendship. We sat down and talked together about almost every topic under the sun. We talked about questions we had about God and Jesus, and I truly felt comfortable. In those moments, I got the chills, realizing how lucky I was, to be surrounded by friends and the presence of God.

I was extremely happy and grateful to God for giving me such a great life. To be okay saying whatever you feel may not sound like much, but as a teenager, especially in school, occasions where you can share your thoughts with people who care and will not judge you can be somewhat rare. That I could say whatever I felt, as a normally shy person, and be accepted, was an amazing feeling.

Moments just relaxing and hanging out together also gave me the powerful feeling of the presence of God. I was having fun with others who shared my love for Him. We did normal things teenagers would do, like

watching movies and joking around, but the powerful sense of unity was always there.

We also watched the sunrise, and even without speaking to each other, the power of God in friendship was astounding. All of us agreed that although others might think it was weird to be hanging out with our church group on a Friday night, it was the best Friday night we had had in a long time.

As written in Ecclesiastes, friendship between two people is great, and the friendship of more people is even better. My friendship with the YUTES has exposed me to the love of God, and has strengthened my faith tremendously.

# David Brunetti

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It all began with a risk. Me and the YUTES...off to Farwell, Michigan. On a “mission trip.” At the time, I was just barely fifteen, and other than the “Bread for Hunger” mission project of Confirmation, I had absolutely no mission experience and, quite frankly, no interest in gaining any. Church was something I did because I was supposed to. It happened every Sunday from 11 to 12 and then I didn’t have to worry about it again for a whole week!

The whole mission trip idea seemed painfully idealistic to me. It was the whole phony, overzealous Christian mentality of “Let’s-go-help-people-who-can’t-help-themselves-for-a-week-because-we’re-just-really-nice-people,” which I really wasn’t all that fond of. Yet here I found myself, in the van on the way to Farwell, Michigan. I mentally prepared myself for what I thought would be the worst week of my life. Some of the older YUTES must have sensed my pessimism and despair and assured me that my experience would help me to grow in my faith, and would probably change my life. I refused to believe them.

A day and a half later, we arrived in Farwell. It was Sunday, July 11, 2004. It was the day my life began to change.

After an afternoon of establishing our territory on the floor of a high school classroom and meeting some random people from all over the country, the four hundred people attending the work camp were called into the gymnasium. After the preliminary gathering, it was time for us to meet the crews we would be working with for the whole week. I was in crew No. 1. We spent some time together that evening to get to know each other better before we went to sleep.

The next morning, the five of us headed out to our worksite. When we got there, I was a little skeptical of how much help they really needed. The house was a converted mobile home with an odd color of brown for the sides. Our instructions were to paint the house “respite blue,” prime and paint a shed in the back yard the same, and to reseal the roof. As we approached the front door to meet the resident of the house, we noticed that the front door was only the wooden frame of a screen door leaning up against the house. There was no screen, no hinges, nothing. We rechecked our instructions. There was nothing about the door.

Our adult leader, Craig, from Virginia, knocked on the house next to

the door. We heard grumbling from inside and we all looked at each other nervously. A moment later, an older man of about 70 came to the door. He was shirtless and held a beer bottle in his hand. He squinted his eyes against the morning sun.

“What you want?” he asked in a voice less than sober.

Craig looked nervous. I couldn’t blame him. “Gary Rhodes?” he asked. Gary looked up at him. “We’re here from Group Workcamps. We’re here to fix your roof and to paint.”

Gary scrunched up his face like he was thinking really hard. Just when I was sure he was about to pop, he stopped and said, “Well, okay then,” and went back into his house. We heard the sound of him collapsing back onto his couch.

We all looked at each other skeptically. “Well, *he* seems nice,” said Eric, another guy on my crew.

We worked until about 12:30, when we stopped for lunch. Craig went up to the door again to see if Gary wanted to join us for lunch and our time of devotions, but the only answer he got was an incoherent mumble, and then snoring a few moments later.

We returned late in the afternoon. I played some Frisbee with some of the YUTES and another youth group, took a shower, had dinner, and went to the evening program.

I had really hoped that every night wasn’t going to be like the first night, where all four hundred of us gathered into the gym and did all that singing and praying and talking. But that night, we did. We prayed, we sang, we shared “God sightings,” how we had seen God’s presence in our work that day, we prayed some more, sang some more, and then it was finally over.

The next three days were basically the same on the worksite. More drunken Gary, more work, sweat, food, devotions. I remembered what I had been told: that this week would change my life. And that Thursday afternoon, July 15, 2004, as we returned to the school after working all day, I refused to believe that the week would accomplish anything except making me more cynical about old people, volunteer work, and organized religion. Only a few hours later, everything would change.

The afternoon started off just like all the others. I came back, took a shower, threw the Frisbee around, went to dinner. Then it was time for the dreaded evening program. Another perfectly good hour of my life I was about to waste. One of the older YUTES, who had been on a trip before, came up to me as I was entering the gym.

He looked me in the eye, “Are you ready for this?” he asked, serious but excited.

I shrugged apathetically, “Yeah. I guess.”

I followed him into the gym.

As the program began, the MC explained to us that tonight was different. Instead of the usual loud music and praise songs, we would be experiencing Stations of the Cross. After explaining what to do, the MC invited

everyone to come down and to go to any of the stations they desired, in whatever order. I sat in the bleachers as everyone around me went down and split off.

After a few minutes of sitting there, moved by whatever force inside of me, perhaps God, I decided to set aside my skepticism just for a while, and see if, just maybe, there was really something to this.

I walked to the back corner of the gym, where there was a block of wood with three large spikes hammered into it. I was given a hammer by a member of the staff, and instructed to strike each spike once. As I did so, I felt my arm shake from the recoil. The sound of the hammer head on the metal filled my senses and echoed throughout the giant room. When I finally put the hammer down, I felt like I could be sick. My stomach was in knots, my head was pounding. And there was only one thought on my mind.

*I am responsible. I am the reason that Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross. He did it for me. He did it for all of us. So that I could be with him again, he died for me, for you.*

At that point, I knew there was only one other station I needed to go to: The Cross. As I approached it, I felt as though I was in the very presence of God. I knelt, and two staff members lowered it onto my shoulder. After they lifted it up off of me several seconds later, I found it hard to move; yet I felt so light. I stood up and walked over to the bleachers. Any initial skepticism I had had about this trip, about Christianity, about life itself had vanished. In that moment, I realized why I had come on that trip. God was calling me back to him, calling to his lost sheep, trying to bring him home. And in that moment, I cried. They were silent, calm tears flowing down my face. Tears of joy, that I had finally come back to God's kingdom.

The next day, Friday, we went to the worksite. I talked with Eric a little that day while we were finishing up the painting. He told me that both he and Craig had marked down a high carpentry skill on their applications for the camp. It seemed odd that they would be given a project that didn't involve any carpentry whatsoever. I was inclined to agree. It was strange. We finished our work right around lunch time.

Just like every other day, Craig went up to the door and asked Gary if he would like to join us for our last devotion. Today was different, however; just as the night before had been different. Today, Gary said yes. He came over, clean, sober, fully clothed, and joined us passively in our discussion. Eventually, the topic of conversation shifted to saying goodbye and losing people who we care about. Someone asked the question if any of us had ever lost someone we really cared about.

Gary spoke up. "My wife went up to be with Jesus, just three weeks back. She had the cancer and was in a wheelchair. That's why we needed you. She couldn't get out of the house without a ramp. You were going to build one for her. But instead, you have come here, and you have saved me with your compassion."



God did a lot of work in me that week. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that He didn't just work through me. He worked through everyone. It was the people who helped guide me back into the pasture that made it possible for God to do His work. He worked through Craig, and Eric, the MC, Gary Rhodes, and especially through this youth group. Had it not been for the genuine care, compassion, and love of these YUTES, God would never have found me.

ACTS 9:7-12, 17

<sup>7</sup>The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. <sup>10</sup>In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered. <sup>11</sup>The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup>In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." <sup>17</sup>Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."