

Sermon for February 13, 2022—“Duty to God”

Scout Sunday 2022—Texts: Joshua 24:14-15; 1 Samuel 12:20-24; Matthew 5:13-16

In preparing for today, I went on the BSA website, and was reminded that the mission of Scouting is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices, over their lifetimes, by instilling in them certain values. I was also reminded that the three principles of Scouting are: Duty to God, Duty to Others, and Duty to Self—in that order.

It’s what I’ve always appreciated about Scouting—that it’s concerned with the whole person: body, mind, spirit, and that it has a social component. But it’s the emphasis on God that sets Scouting apart from a lot of other young people’s organizations.

As a boy, as most of you know, I was a Scout and, for the most part, I had great memories. I went to a Jamboree in 1977, when it was in the Pittsburgh area, had the opportunity to go to four high adventure bases, the first of which was Philmont in 1976, and every summer, for two weeks I got to go to a place called Tionesta.

In the midst of all the activities, and earning badges, I attended the chapel services overlooking the lake. As the troop chaplain, I even led a few of them. When I was older, I served on staff at the camp, and was often pressed into service when the staff chaplain wasn’t available. If you would’ve told me then that I’d eventually become a pastor, and preach every Sunday, I’d have thought you’d lost your mind. That’s why I’ve always said if you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plan. Over time I earned two religious medals: the Ad Altare Dei and the Pope Pius XII, which I’m wearing this morning.

As I look back, strange as it may sound, it was the promises, and the ideals of scouting—it was all of **that**—more than anything else—that nurtured me in my faith, and best prepared me for life. I’ve come to believe that advancement in Scouting is simply a means to an end, not an end in itself. Even if you become an Eagle Scout, it doesn’t mean that you’ve made it, and can simply coast the rest of your life. In many ways it’s just the beginning. I’ve learned that “being prepared”—the Scout motto—is a life-long discipline, one doesn’t just tick a bunch of boxes, and say, “I’m good! I’m prepared!”

I’m sure even Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouting would agree, that being prepared requires regular upkeep. This is definitely true as a person of faith, especially as a pastor, because one can never take one’s duty to God for granted. But what exactly does that mean? What role do things like faith, spirituality, and so forth, play in Scouting? Specifically, what does that mean for Scouts?

Well, for me, as both a pastor, and a former Scout, it means that we must not ever neglect the spiritual component of Scouting, nor spiritual development in our young people. This is crucial in a time, when fewer and fewer people are attending church, let alone joining; a time when fewer and fewer people seem to believe in nothing and no one.

It’s well documented that Americans are leaving organized religion in droves. They disagree with churches on political issues. They feel judged. They feel restricted by dogma. I get that. I really do. I don’t blame them. Sometimes I think that the Church has become its own worst enemy. Yet, while one in five Americans reject organized religion, they do manage to maintain some kind of faith. A growing number of Americans, particularly young Americans, identify as “spiritual but not religious.”

As someone who'd spent several years in youth ministry before being ordained, I can tell you that young people want to believe in something—and they will. They want to know, and if given the right space and enough time they will ask questions. Good questions. Important questions! They will want answers. But if we're not willing to help them find those answers, they'll look elsewhere—to places and people we'd rather they'd not go. that will. Is that what we want? Probably not. It's for that reason alone that I believe that spiritual development—intentional spiritual development—is not only important, but **crucial**.

Spiritual development in young people is, in part, about helping them understand themselves, the changes they're going through, and those going on in the world around them, helping them cultivate identity and meaning, direction and purpose. It's about understanding the connections between themselves and others, their connection to all of Creation, and especially to the Creator. It's about linking them to the stories, the beliefs, and the traditions that give fullness and meaning to their experiences. It's about helping them live integrated and authentic lives. And spiritual development matters because it is an intrinsic part of being human, and because young people themselves view it as important.

Earlier, I mentioned Robert Baden-Powell, Scouting's founding father—called B-P by his friends, and Robin by his wife—and he believed strongly that faith was integral to Scouting, and that duty to God should be at its heart. When asked to describe where, in Scouting, religion came in, he said: "I'm afraid it does not come in at all, it is already there. It is the fundamental factor underlying Scouting."

Here, you may ask: Why? Why is faith such a big part of Scouting? Here's what B-P said, when asked that very question: "Religion," he said, "is essential to happiness. This is not a mere matter of going to church, knowing Bible history, or understanding theology. Religion means recognizing who and what God is; second it is making the best of the life he has given us; and third it is doing what He wants of us. That is mainly doing something for others." Lord Powell—the son of a minister—recognized that when a young person includes God and service to others in their life, it is a life well lived. The key lies in service to others.

Spirituality, religion, faith—whatever name you want to give it—is about the individual, without doubt. But for Baden-Powell, it didn't end with the individual. In his last message to the Scout, released after his death in 1941, he wrote this—and here, brothers and sisters is the thing:

"[Scouting's] aim is to produce healthy, happy, helpful citizens; to eradicate the prevailing narrow self-interest; personal, political, sectarian and national, and to substitute for it a broader spirit of self-sacrifice and service in the cause of humanity; and thus to develop mutual goodwill and cooperation not only within our own country but abroad, between all countries. Experience shows that this consummation is no idle or fantastic dream, but is a practicable possibility—if we work for it; and it means, when attained, peace, prosperity and happiness for all.

“The ‘encouraging promise’ lies in the fact that the hundreds of thousands of boys and girls who are learning our ideals today will be the fathers and mothers of millions in the near future, in whom they will in turn inculcate [instill] the same ideals—provided that these are really and unmistakably impressed upon them by the leaders of today.”

And there you have it, from Lieutenant General Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, 1st Baron Baden-Powell himself. So, I challenge everyone here this morning:

Leaders? Are you doing everything we can to prepare our Scouts and Cubs spiritually?

Parents, what about you? Any teacher will tell you what’s taught in school, has to be reinforced at home. And for those who’ve baptized their children, I’m willing to bet that when you did, you made a promise to nurture those children in the faith. I know for a fact that’s true in Catholicism, and in most Protestant denominations. Are you keeping that promise?

For the Scouts? Do you have questions? Ask them. Ask your pastor. Don’t have a pastor? Ask me. I’m always ready to listen and always ready to help. I bet you have the same questions I did when I was younger.

In closing let me say to you all, and anyone else who might be struggling with faith that for me, it’s not about religion—it’s about relationship. Relationship with a God who know you and loves you, who wants you to know and love yourself, as well as those around you, and to do everything you can to serve them. It’s as I said to my nephew, who’s a sophomore at UC [University of Cincinnati], “Give faith a chance. Don’t simply dismiss it as being unimportant, or unnecessary. If you do, you’re short-changing yourself, and everyone around you!”

But hey, if you’re going to listen to anyone, listen to Jesus, who said, as we heard in our gospel reading, “You are the salt of the earth... “You are the light of the world... “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.