

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 5, 2014

God and Life: Rules for Living

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October 6, 2014

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Today is World Communion Sunday. Christian churches throughout the world are celebrating the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Whatever they may call this sacrament they are doing one thing, recognizing the Lordship of Christ and the saving grace that he gave to all of us on the cross.

Christians may, and do, disagree about many things but not about Christ. Nor do Christians disagree about today's scripture reading from Exodus, that part of scripture which we know of as the Ten Commandments.

Those commandments are God's rules for living, rules which were given by God on a mountain top about 3500 years ago. Those ten rules clearly and succinctly tell us what God expects of us. They are our rules for living.

Elsewhere in scripture in Deuteronomy 5 we find these ten rules, these Ten Commandments, repeated.

Then in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 we find another statement of these rules for living a godly life, a much shorter statement that the Jews call the Shema, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The Shema is what Jesus said to the Pharisees about 2000 years ago when they asked him which was the greatest commandment. He gave them two – love God and love your neighbor.

If you read the Ten Commandments and compare them to the Shema, that is to Jesus' two Great Commandments, you will see that they really say the same thing. The first four of the Ten Commandments show love for God and the final six show love for others.

This morning we are recognizing some young men with an award called “God and Life.” These young men are Scouts and they have gone through a long period of Bible study in the course of meeting the requirements of this award.

But what is it that they had to do?

You all undoubtedly know what the Eagle Scout Award is. It is the highest honor that a Boy Scout can earn through Scouting activities such as camping, hiking, aquatics, and so on. The Eagle Award also recognizes leadership skills and only about one percent of Scouts ever achieve it. It is truly a major accomplishment.

What you may not know is that there is a parallel set of awards for both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts which relate to accomplishments in faith. The names of these religious awards varies from religion to religion and denomination to denomination but in mainline protestant denominations they are called the God and Country Awards. There are four awards in the series, the highest of which is the God and Life Award. If you think that the Eagle Award is a major accomplishment earned by only about one percent of Scouts, consider that there are probably ten or more Eagle Scouts for every one Scout who earns the God and Life Award. Eagle is a major distinction. God and Life is a much greater distinction.

Christians and Jews have the Ten Commandments, or if we prefer, the Shema or the two Great Commandments, to guide our lives.

Scouts don't think of it that way but they have twelve commandments, the Scout Law, which was set down over 100 years ago. In short form, the Scout law says, “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” Those 16 words are the Scout Law that Scouts repeat every time they meet. The first eleven items in the list really encompass the second Great Commandment, loving your neighbor. The final law, “A Scout is reverent” is the first Great Commandment, loving God, and that final law is what the God and Life Award is all about.

The Scout Handbook, which by the way has sold more copies worldwide than any other book in history with the sole exception of the Holy Bible, says, “*A Scout is reverent. A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. He respects the beliefs of others.*”

Belief in God is a requirement to be a Scout and there are no exceptions to that requirement, understandably so. I am closest to God when I am outdoors enjoying and admiring his great creation and the same is often true for Scouts.

A Scouting web site, boyscoutstrail.com, expresses that quite well with these words:

“As a scout experiences the wonders of the outdoors, stormy weather and calm blue skies, pounding surf and trickling streams, bitter cold and stifling heat, towering trees and barren desert, he experiences the work of God. Appreciating life in its multitude of forms, from the smallest insects to gigantic wildlife, a scout comes to terms with his place in the world. Though humans are the dominant beings on our planet, we need to play the role of steward rather than king - tending and caring for our world instead of taking all we can for our own comfort.

As technology continues to become more and more prevalent and people visit the wild places less and less, our connection to and understanding of our natural environment lessens. We take shelter, food, comfort, and entertainment for granted rather than needing to work for it. When we never have to harvest an apple from a tree, kill a fish or animal for meat, or put on layers of clothes to stay warm, we lose the sense of awe and respect we should have for nature.

Many outdoors people claim that the wilderness is their 'church' rather than a specific structure or organization. These people revere in the awesome power of God by being in the thick of natural creation. The reverence expressed for the world and its creation is common ground that all scouts can reach when struggling to understand the last point of the Scout Law.

No matter the specific religion or denomination, being reverent toward God should include our natural environment. In nature, there is no good or evil, just survival. Animals don't have the human vices of lust, pride, envy, gluttony, greed, sloth, and anger. We can learn a lot about simplifying and enjoying life from observing the wild creatures. We can also learn how our ability to care for and serve others puts us above the simple animals.

While in the wilds, a scout may come face-to-face with God. He may feel God around him in the wind, the water, the earth, and the open, wild beauty. When the scout

returns home, he needs to continue that respect and awe toward God by participating in the practices of his religion. Becoming a complete citizen includes fulfilling expectations of the church to which a person belongs. What a great opportunity to share with other youth and adults in his church, when he returns from a backpacking trek. Faithfully performing his religious duties demonstrates his reverence while in civilization...

Reverence fosters joy and a cheerful heart, able to appreciate and care for the good in life."

The three young men whom we recognize this morning have been studying the Bible and interpreting scripture while working on this award since last June. They have read Acts of the Apostles, Galatians, First and Second Corinthians, and Romans in their entirety and have studied numerous other Bible passages. They have extensively studied the work of Paul, probably the greatest of all of the apostles. Each of them has done five service projects and has assisted in conducting vesper services at Camp Bud Schiele, the local Boy Scout Camp which serves eleven counties of North Carolina. Will each Scout come forward with his parents to receive the God and Life Award as I call your name. I ask that their mothers pin the award on their uniforms.

Life Scout William K. Sebastian, Will is in the 10th grade at Caldwell Early College High School in Hudson.

Life Scout Michael Finnian Green. Finn is a freshman at Hibriten High School in Lenoir.

Eagle Scout Tucker Green. Tucker is a senior at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Durham.

Scouts, you are now wearing a God & Life emblem. It features a four-colored cross. The four colors converge into a point to create an X, which is the Greek letter Chi. Chi is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ, and it is symbolic of how Christ should be at the center of our lives. The red symbolizes love and the blood of Christ. The yellow symbolizes sunlight and joy. The blue symbolizes loyalty and truth. And the green symbolizes new life and growth. May you always know that you are "Called by Christ to serve."

Let us pray:

Lord, your Son has called all of us into the adventures of learning and serving. Today we celebrate those who have answered that call in a special way. We thank you for Will, Finn and Tucker and for this moment of joyous celebration. Continue to challenge all of us to grow in Christian service, that your kingdom may become a reality in and through our lives. **Amen.**