

Boy Scout Sunday (February 14, 2016)

“Character Counts”[©]

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I distinctly remember as a teenager commenting to my mother that the past year seemed to go by more quickly than prior years. She chuckled, and responded that every year going forward would seem to go by quicker than the last. And she was right . . . It seems like we were in this sanctuary to celebrate Scout Sunday just a few months ago. But here we are once again, taking time to thank Larchmont United Methodist Church and you, its members, for supporting Scouting programs. As I have mentioned before, I truly believe that this annual event is not only an occasion to celebrate Scouting and the values it espouses, but also an opportunity to recognize that *we all* can benefit from the lessons of Scouting. Over the years I have had the good fortune of witnessing the transformation of many unfocused boys into dedicated young men destined to become tomorrow’s leaders. I also know what Scouting did for me in my youth, and how what I learned a very long time ago continues to impact my life.

Several years ago, while I was Cubmaster of Pack 24, I was leading a scout-recruiting event at Larchmont Elementary School. Pack leaders went there once or twice a year to meet with parents and boys who were interested in joining the Pack. As I recall, there were about ten parents there that night, most of whom had their sons with them. After explaining a little about the Pack and the events in which the Pack participated, I asked whether there were any questions. One father put his hand up. He asked, “Why should my sons join Scouting?” When I did not immediately respond—or perhaps noticing my jaw drop—he quickly added that he and his family had just moved to the United States and he was not familiar with Boy Scouts. I thought to myself, “How could it be that someone had not heard of the Boy Scouts of America?” And then I thought, “Why don’t I have a ready answer to this question?”

The Scouting Program Seeks to Develop Character

I’ve thought about that moment many times since that day. Why *should* boys and young men participate in Scouting?

Scouting is fun. It fosters camaraderie and develops social skills and teamwork. It introduces youth to the great outdoors and the survival skills necessary to commune with nature. For most, it exposes them to activities in which they otherwise would not participate—camping in tents; backpacking on the Appalachian Trail and through the Rocky Mountains; high adventure encounters like rock climbing, rappelling, white-water rafting, and caving; water activities like canoeing, sailing, and lifesaving; historical reenactments, like camping at Valley Forge in the snow ... as the Troop did several weeks ago. Scouting teaches self-reliance and confidence. It provides learning opportunities and challenges through advancement requirements that literally span years, which is why the attainment of the rank of Eagle Scout is so noteworthy. It introduces youth to many different fields of study and possible vocations through its merit badge program. It provides leadership opportunities. It emphasizes patriotism and community

involvement as it strives to develop good citizens. It teaches the importance of service to others.

There clearly are many benefits to Scouting, but the true purpose of Scouting actually goes deeper. As Lord Robert Baden-Powell, who founded the Scouting movement over a century ago, instructed scout leaders; "Let us, therefore, in training our Scouts, keep the higher aims in the forefront, not let ourselves get too absorbed in the steps. Don't let the technical outweigh the moral. Field efficiency, back woodsmanship, camping, hiking, Good Turns, ... comradeship are all means, not the end. The end is *CHARACTER with a purpose.*" This concept is reflected in the mission of the Boy Scouts of America: "to prepare young people to make *ethical and moral* choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the *values* of the Scout Oath and Law." Here are the values that Scouting seeks to instill in our youth as expressed in the Scout Law. A Scout is trustworthy ... loyal ... helpful ... friendly ... courteous ... kind ... obedient ... cheerful ... thrifty ... brave ... clean ... and reverent. And the Scout Oath expands this concept even further. Listen to how it emphasizes the values of strong character. "On my *honor*, I will do my *best* to do my *duty* to God and my country, to *obey the Scout Law*, to *help other people* at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and *morally straight.*" We teach scouts to focus on the Scout Oath and Law as they participate in activities, and we start each Scout meeting by reciting them.

The *Handbook for Boys*, the original Boy Scout Manual published in 1910, sums this up well: "Wherever there have been heroes, there have been scouts, and to be a scout means to be prepared to do the *right thing* at the *right moment*, no matter what the consequences may be." In another section, the original handbook states: "[C]haracter is the thing that distinguishes a good scout from a bad one. Character is not what men say about you. A great writer once said . . . 'Your life speaks louder than your words.' ... It is necessary that a boy should live right and possess such a character as will help him to do *the hardest things of life*. Every boy should remember that he is in reality just what he is when alone in the dark."

Stated simply, the Boy Scouts of America strives to develop young people with strong character.

Society's Emphasis on Character Has Faded

The notion of character is harder to comprehend than it may sound initially. First of all, what does it mean to be a person of character? Syndicated columnist David Brooks has observed that we lack an adequate vocabulary to fully discuss character, which he believes contributes to the problem we face today of raising children that possess the virtues traditionally associated with strong character. Character in this context generally is understood to mean moral excellence and firmness. Persons of character are noted for their ethics, courage, and compassion, as well as their honesty, perseverance, and service to others. Some describe them as "persons of principle" or "persons of integrity." A lack of character, on the other hand, is moral deficiency, and persons lacking character tend to behave dishonestly, unethically, and uncharitably. A person's character is the sum of his or her disposition, thoughts, intentions, desires, and actions, and character is reputational, meaning it takes time

for others to conclude that you possess a positive character ... but only an isolated negative incident to destroy that reputation.

The twelve points of the Boy Scout Law have not changed since the founding of the Boy Scouts more than a century ago. The Scouting movement clearly recognizes the importance of internal virtues and character, and over the years it has used recruiting mottos such as “Timeless Values” and “Character Counts.” But while these traditional values have not changed over time, the world in which we live certainly has. In colonial days, one’s honor was revered, and it was not uncommon for duels to take place to protect one’s honor if it was questioned. As you may know from your history books—or from the current Broadway musical—Alexander Hamilton lost his life to Vice President Aaron Burr during one such duel. Honor was important. The Founding Fathers concluded the Declaration of Independence by pledging their lives, their fortunes, and *their sacred honor*. It is not a coincidence that the oath that all new Eagle Scouts take ends with the scout pledging his sacred honor.

But today we live in the “Me” generation where the focus is on immediate gratification and self-centered pursuits. Many in this generation demands rewards without hard work, seeking to avoid the struggle that is necessary for a true sense of accomplishment. When a 2006 Pew research group polled 18-25 year olds, 81% reported that their first or second most important goal in life was “to get rich,” while 51% reported it was “to be famous.” On the other end of the spectrum, only 30% reported “to help people who need help”; 22% reported “to be leaders in their community”; and 10% reported “to become more spiritual.”

In his recent book, titled *The Road to Character*, David Brooks contrasts what he calls resume virtues with eulogy virtues. He explains that resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume—the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to your external success. Eulogy virtues, by contrast, are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are trustworthy, kind, brave, or faithful ... the kind of virtues identified in the 12 points of the Scout Law. Our educational system emphasizes the resume virtues and largely ignores the eulogy ones. So does society, which teaches us to be career-oriented, ambitious, and competitive—to seek high status and to be victorious over others. The irony is that those who focus only on the resume virtues ultimately are not happy—there is never enough money, or enough fame, or enough success. This is because true contentment emanates from an inner peace, which only comes through the achievement of the eulogy virtues. Knowing that you did your best ... being proud that you did what you *knew* was right ... being content that you placed the interests of others above your own.

This does not mean we should avoid the quest for the resume virtues. Rather, we need to consciously balance worldly success with humility and service to others. We must acknowledge what David Brooks noted in his book: “Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself. In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself.”

Why Character Is Important

So why is the development of character important?

Today's scripture lesson is instructive. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, *we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope*, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Paul tells us that we should rejoice in our sufferings. This may sound crazy – *rejoice* in our sufferings?? He instructs us that suffering—or persevering through challenges with which we are confronted—produces endurance, and endurance produces character. I think what Paul is saying is that when challenged, we must struggle to overcome the obstacle, and that this conflict will produce character. In other words, if we face our trials head-on and devote the energy necessary to win them, our character will be strengthened. We cannot simply give up and avoid challenges altogether, because the perseverance makes us stronger ... the journey is more important than the destination.

So we must embrace challenges when they are thrust upon us in order to weather the storms of life. Perhaps more importantly, there are times when we need to consciously *choose* to take the more arduous path ... to seek out the difficult ... to welcome the challenge. Although the struggle is rarely enjoyable, we strengthen our character during the process.

The experience of overcoming challenges, and the associated knowledge that we have the power to overcome such difficulties, gives us the courage to face even bigger challenges in the future. This is the hope about which Paul speaks. Our confidence in our ability to rise above our struggles provides us the hope necessary to confront and overcome more complex and difficult challenges—what the original Scout handbook referred to as the power "to do the hardest things in life."

Paul tells us that character produces the hope to see the possible ... not to see how *we* can be more successful, but rather to see how we can be more effective servants ... how we can be instruments of positive change. This is the message of Paul, but it also is the message of Scouting. With the primary aim of developing character, the Scouting program challenges youth with advancement requirements ... with service projects ... with leadership opportunities. Scouts are guided by the Scout Oath and the Scout Law. They learn to welcome challenges and even to seek them out, just as Paul tells us we all should do. In so doing, scouts—and we—become men and women of character poised to make positive contributions.

This confluence of the aim of Scouting and Paul's teaching is not coincidental. As Baden-Powell noted, "There is no religious 'side' of the [Scouting] movement. The whole of it is based on religion, that is, on the realization and service of God." "Our objective in the Scouting movement is to give such help as we can in bringing about God's Kingdom on earth by including among youth the spirit and the daily practice in their lives of unselfish goodwill and cooperation." The Scout Slogan is "Do a Good Turn Daily." According to Baden-Powell: "[T]he final and chief test of the scout is the doing of a good turn to somebody every day, quietly and without boasting. This is the proof of the scout. It is practical religion, and a boy honors God best when he helps others most."

The Scouting Program Works

You may be wondering whether focusing on character development works. Studies demonstrate that, at least in the context of Scouting, it does.

A 2015 Tufts University study looked at both Cub Scouts and non-Scouts under age 12. Although there was no statistical difference in the boys initially, after two and a half years in the study, the boys in Cub Scouts reported significant *increases* in cheerfulness, helpfulness, kindness, obedience, trustworthiness, and hopeful future expectations. There were *no* significant increases reported among non-Scouts. When asked what was most important to them, Scouts were significantly more likely than non-Scouts to choose *helping others or doing the right thing* as compared to *being smart, being the best, or playing sports*. A 2012 independent research study of Scouts conducted by Baylor University found that Eagle Scouts are more likely to volunteer, donate money to charity, vote, and work with others to improve their neighborhood than men who have never been in Scouting. They were also found to be more goal-oriented, have higher levels of planning and preparation skills, and be more likely to take a leadership position at work or in their local communities.

These studies prove that Scouting really does develop character in youth. I think that they also demonstrate that if we consciously choose to focus on and develop our eulogy virtues, we can develop strong character, thereby affecting our lives as well as the lives of those with whom we choose to interact.

So now if I am asked why a boy should join Cub Scouts or Boy Scouts, I'll have a ready answer:

Scouting builds boys mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually. Through the program, boys learn life skills and participate in activities like camping, building projects, and serving others. Scouting fosters confidence and self-esteem, a sense of value and belonging, and the importance of honesty, accountability, citizenship, and teamwork. Scouting instills the values and character necessary to overcome obstacles and challenges that these young people will face throughout their lives and to become leaders in their communities. Scouting is, as the founder of Scouting put it, a game with a purpose. That purpose is to develop character, because character counts.

So here's what I've tried to say today:

- First, today's society fails to emphasize the importance of character.
- Second, like the Scouting program, we all need to focus on our eulogy virtues—including courage, honor, and compassion—and properly balance them with our resume virtues.
- Third, Scouting—and religion—teach us that we should welcome struggles, so that we can learn perseverance and develop strong character.

- And, finally, a strong character equips us with the ability to seek out and embrace new and more complex challenges with a focus on what role we can play in creating a better world.

Looking back to when that father asked me in the Larchmont Elementary School auditorium why his sons should join Scouting, I know I didn't have a good response. But fortunately that father registered his boys anyway, and the Scouting program spoke for itself. This father clearly recognized the value and purpose of Scouting, and I have had the pleasure of witnessing his sons develop character as young scouts. And this father became active as an adult Scout Leader. And the same man—who had never heard of the Boy Scouts of America—became the Cubmaster of Pack 24 a few years later, and he still serves in that capacity today. That man is my friend, Stephane Girois.

There are many things in our life over which we have no control. We don't get to pick our parents or upbringing, or our natural talents, or our intelligence. But we do get to decide our character, because character is a reflection of our choices ... how we embrace struggles ... how we learn from our mistakes ... how we seek out newer and bigger challenges. Our character gives us hope. The hope needed to rely on our faith, and to place the interests of others above our own, and to be a catalyst for positive change. Will you welcome the struggles? Will you envision the possibilities? Will you embrace the eulogy virtues? May we be bold in our choices, because character truly counts.