

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Words to Live By

A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

That is the 12 points of the Scout Law. And that is so often exactly how they say it, kind of sing-songy, with a noticeable acceleration towards the end of the list. Repeat. These boys mostly learned that law when they were 9 or 10 years old, when they were still Webelos, the highest rank in Cub Scouts. They learned those words by memorizing them, learning the sound and the cadence of them, practicing them out loud over and over, without frankly much understanding about what they mean. When you ask a Webelos Scout to recite the Scout Law, he won't hesitate, "A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent." Then if you ask him what does *thrifty* mean, you will get a blank stare. Don't even bother to ask what reverent means. But over time, and lots more repetition, the scouts grow up, and they learn what all of those words mean. They are asked whenever they go into board of review to make their next rank how they have been living the Scout Law lately. So those words that start out as almost a foreign language, learned by rote and repetition, eventually become kind of second nature for the boys. They are shaped by those words and their meaning. The 12 points of the Scout Law, and all of their scouting experiences, lay down a firm foundation in boyhood upon which each one, when he becomes a man, will continue to build.

My own experience with Boy Scouts as a lad was not what you would call ideal. I was a member of a troop that was pretty poorly organized, and we lacked strong leadership. I was only

in the troop for about a year, and hadn't advanced much at all. Let me put it this way, the son of my scout master, who was in the troop with me, was later arrested and put in jail as an accessory to murder. It's fair to say that the program failed to make a big impact on him. However, he did use his scout skills and ingenuity to escape from jail. I'm not joking. He was picked up again. But my point is that I personally did not have a very positive experience in scouting.

My boys first got involved with scouting when I was invited to attend an Eagle Scout court of honor here at Christ Church. It was a boy from our troop 1841. As the head of the chartering organization, I wanted to be there to support the boys and the troop. I learned that the boy who had earned his Eagle award was a special needs kid who had gone through the regular scouting program with lots of help and support from his parents and scout leaders, but without any special waivers to the requirements. It was a particularly moving ceremony, and the first one I'd ever attended. My older son, Aaron, was in first grade at the time. I was so impressed with the whole experience that I went home and told my wife that Aaron needed to be a Cub Scout the next year... and he was. And David has been in scouts since first grade. It's been wonderful for both of them.

It is a great responsibility, to have a part to play in a young person's development as a human. It is obviously something that can go horribly wrong, as in my experience of scouting, but when done well, with love and firmness, with guidance and encouragement, the outcome can be an adult to be proud of. Families are the central part of that process, but youth organizations like the scouts, or sports, or even the Church, can have a tremendous impact, supplementing the love and guidance a family provides in the best case, and providing it in the worst case when it is missing at home.

We should all take care how we interact with children and youth, and never pass up an opportunity to be a help or a support. By doing that, we are like St. Paul who laid, among the Corinthians a foundation of Jesus Christ, upon which others were able to build. If the foundation wasn't laid carefully, if it wasn't laid in good faith with sound teaching, then the people of Corinth would have not been able to be led to the next level in their walk with Jesus. They would have stumbled and fallen. As it was, Paul's work among them was not in vain. They were built up in the Lord as other leaders came along to lead them. So it is with the children in our midst. We have one opportunity to shape them during their impressionable years, to give them what they need to be good people when they grow up, to lay a foundation that will support them their whole lives.

Scouting is one of those programs that can help to lay a firm foundation in a young person's life. Just as the Church tries to instill in our children a love for Christ and a dedication to his service, so the scouts instill a sense of responsibility, community spirit, selfless giving, respect for the environment, self-sufficiency, and fun. The ideals that are expressed in the Scout Law turn out to be not just a few memorized syllables that a child can recite on demand. They are principals that begin their work in a boy's young life, but continue throughout his adulthood, constantly molding him as he faces life's challenges with their high standards. A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

One time I had the privilege of sitting on a board of review for a boy who was up for his Eagle award, the highest and most prestigious award in all scouting. He was a very impressive young man who wanted to go to medical school after college and be a surgeon. I had no doubt he would be able to do that. We asked him all the questions we were supposed to ask him. He

gave us all the answers he was supposed to give us. Then, when we were just about finished, the person leading the board said, “Any more questions?” I hadn’t thought of the question before that moment, but I was suddenly very curious about those words and their impact on this particular young man. I said to him, “You learned the Scout Law when you were just a little kid, and now you’re about to turn 18 and getting ready to graduate from high school. When you learned those twelve words, you probably didn’t really understand what they all meant. Is there one of them that you have learned something more about over the years, or that you have developed a deeper understanding of through your experiences in scouting?”

He was quiet and thought about the question for a while. Then he spoke. He said that it wasn’t necessarily through his scouting experiences, but that yes he had come to a deeper understanding of one of the words in particular. It was the word Brave. He said that when he was little, he would have thought of being brave to mean, like fighting a dragon, or going off to war, or something like that. Then he told us a story about something that happened in his classroom at school when he was in middle school. There was a substitute teacher. As usual when there’s a substitute, the class was particularly rowdy that day. He was joining in the rowdiness along with his friends. I can’t remember what it was exactly, but something happened when the teacher’s back was turned. Maybe something was thrown, or maybe something was said by one of the students. Anyway, the teacher turned around and believed that she knew who had done it, but she got it wrong. She spoke harshly to the boy she was sure had done the thing. Of course he denied it, but that only made her more angry. Apparently this wasn’t even one of the boys that was being rowdy during class, but for some reason she was certain he was the guilty party.

The scout telling this story told us how terrible it was to watch as an innocent student got in trouble for something that he didn't do. No one spoke up. He truly regretted not speaking up and telling that teacher that she was wrong and that it wasn't fair for that boy to get in trouble. He felt like he had failed in that situation. When he asked himself why he didn't do it, he realized that it was because he wasn't brave. That's what he had learned about that particular point in the Scout Law, that sometimes in life being brave means to stand up for someone else, and to speak the truth even when you won't like the consequences.

That's why my boys both got involved with scouting. That's why I am proud that Christ Church is once again the chartering organization for a troop. Any group that has that kind of impact on a young man is one I want to be part of. And if you think that those words are only active in the life of a boy while he is still a scout, I have one more story for you. Once when my boys were still in Cub Scouts, we were set up outside of Walmart selling popcorn. You've seen the scouts doing that. Up walked a man who looked to be in his early 50s. He was pretty scruffy looking, long hair, a scraggly beard, and wearing a leather vest over his tee shirt and blue jeans. He said, "I don't want any popcorn, but here," and he handed me a 20 dollar bill. Then he snapped to attention, raised his three fingers in the familiar scout sign, and said clearly and without hesitation, "A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent." Then he turned and walked into the store.

Yeah. Those words stick with you, and if you let them, they work on you.

Amen.