

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: "A Scout's Scout"
Scripture: Numbers 13:25-33
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Numbers 13:25-33

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan.'

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.' Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are.' So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, 'The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.'

It's been a rough couple of weeks in the world of Scouts, of politics, of international travel with the coronavirus, for Boston Red Sox fans, and for baseball. Let's skip politics, since I'm doing two weeks of "Religion in the News: Politics Edition" after Church.

The Red Sox traded their best player to the Dodgers, so that makes half of our Church sad and Dodger-haters, me, mad. So, let's skip over that. Watching China mishandle their virus crisis, with international business and travel damaged, heroic young doctors dying, and as always, the innocent suffering. It feels like a scene from Dante's "Purgatorio." So let's skip over that. That leaves Scouts and

baseball, two bastions of Americana, suffering from self-inflicted wounds and bad Karma.

The Boy Scouts are in the same boat as a local Church like ours. Things happen at the macro level, the headquarters level, the universal level, that end up hurting everybody who's just trying to do our best on the local level. You might wonder why I even mention this in Church or why we even have a Scout Sunday. A lot of folks don't realize that a Boy Scout troop is literally, legally, programmatically, officially part of Greenfield Hill Church. It is our troop. They are us. We are them.

I grew up as part of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Queens and Boy Scout Troop 4. Whenever I told folks I went to Pilgrim, they'd say, "Oh, that's Troop 4." When I told folks I was in Troop 4, they'd say, "Oh, that's Pilgrim Congregational Church." They were us. We were them.

When I was a pastor in New York City, many of my colleagues were African-American pastors. And when we had our monthly clergy meetings, each pastor would brag a bit about what good was going on in our Churches. Sunday attendance, successful fundraising, a big mission project, how many baptisms and new members—standard Church stuff. But it was the black pastors who always included their Scout reports. They'd say, "We had 14 at our Cub Scout meeting, 12 at Brownies, 21 at Boy Scouts, and two new Eagles." Their Scouts were as important to them as their Sunday School, their men's group, their choir.

We are very proud of our Scouts. Outstanding young men and women have come up through the ranks, from Cubs and Brownies to Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. They've been part of Troops and Dens and Packs all over town.

A couple of weeks ago we had a "Sports Worship" theme at our Sunday morning service, and we heard from a bunch (I think it was 13) of outstanding high-schoolers. They talked about what it took to be successful at their sport, at dance, at music, at their specific, unique craft. You heard them. They talked about effort, commitment, teamwork, focus, looking out for one another, leadership, discipline, faith. The same things that make for a good Church. A good Scout. A good person. A good nation. I'm very proud of our Troop.

When I moved here 23 years ago, it was at the height of anti-gay actions in Scouting. No gays welcome. So my first month here I invited all the Scout leaders to sit with me. I prepared a passionate Biblical lecture on equality and love. I was ready to lay down the gauntlet, but before I could say much, our Scout leaders took the reins. They said, "Hey, in our Troop it is very simple. You want to be a Scout, be a Scout. You want to help, help. Everybody is welcome." They, we, were ahead of the curve. Ahead of society. Ahead of the law. Ahead of most religion. Ahead of Scouting.

There's a wonderful old Gospel choir song, "My God Is an On-time God." Well, our Scouts, 23 years ago, were On-Time Scouts. Maybe Ahead-of-Time Scouts. Certainly About-time Scouts.

Now, I mentioned baseball, specifically the Houston Astros. What a mess. The Astros evidently cheated their way to success the last few years, including a World Series championship, devising a high-tech/low-tech scheme using algorithms and garbage cans to help their batters know what pitch was coming ahead of time. Actually, the Astros have made a bunch of bad steps recently, including, catch this, firing most of their Scouts. *Their Scouts*.

Scouts, in baseball, are sort of like our Scouts and sort of like Greenfield Hill Church. Our Troops are like most other little homegrown Scout groups. Old-fashioned. Back to basics. Keep it simple. Do things the right way. Use your head. Work hard. That's what the Astros didn't want. Cheating? Yes. Cutting corners? Yes. Scouts? No. They didn't want old-fashioned. They were embarrassed by old-fashioned. They got rid of old-fashioned Scouts.

The last few Mondays, I've been at Boston College to hear my friend the Czech priest, Father Tomáš Halík, lecture. Last Monday my son and I got there early, walked the campus, and hit the bookstore. Outside the bookstore were Girl Scouts, Boston College girls in their Scout uniforms, proudly selling Girl Scout Cookies, with piles of college kids lined up to buy them. No one there was embarrassed by old-fashioned Scouts or cookies "

O.K., let's talk about Scouts. You heard our Scripture lesson. God chose Israel to become a bright light of the world. God's plan was to shape the Jewish people into a way of being and thinking, and doing that was quite unusual for the day. Lots of emphasis on oneness, on justice, on fair play, on helping.

How many know the Scout Law? Say it along with me: "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent."

They stole that from the Bible: the Torah, the Prophets, the Sermon on the Mount. St. Paul. It's all in there. God's plan was for Israel to show us how to be that way. So God devises a plan. God creates a people out of Abraham and brings them to a place to call their own. The Promised Land. But first, Moses does a smart thing. He picks 12 Scouts to scout the land. Check it out. Keenly observe. Watch, listen, learn. Be careful. Be prepared. Come back. Report.

Now, those Scouts had to be special people. They were headed into an unknown land with only the supplies they could carry. They needed to be strong, wise, self-sufficient, careful, skillful. I think of the Merit Badges I took as a Scout: Tracking,

Cooking, Weather, Archery, Swimming, Hiking—they would have used all of those. So, off they went. When they got back, they gave an honest report *and*, sadly, a P.S.: “It’s too scary.”

They accurately reported, saying, “The land does flow with milk and honey! Look at these gigantic grapes, pomegranates, and figs. BUT . . .! But the people there are too big, the cities are too strong, the problems are too many, the obstacles are too . . . whatever.” And here’s the clincher. They said, “Compared to them, we look like grasshoppers.”

Only Caleb said, “We should go up, take possession of the land; for we can surely do it. We can surely do it.” (Numbers 13:30)

That’s “A Scout’s Scout,” my sermon title today. He didn’t back away from a challenge. He didn’t turn his back on an opportunity. He didn’t shy away from risk. He didn’t give up on himself, on his people, or on his God. “We can surely do it,” he said.

I started off this sermon by admitting it’s been a rough couple of weeks: for sports, politics, world health, and Scouts. And they all teach us harsh lessons, but necessary lessons. Our youngest Scout here today is probably 11; our oldest worshipper is probably 92-94, but neither one is too young or too old to face those lessons: there are sports heroes who cheat; there are politicians who lie. There are governments that can’t be trusted. There are Churches that let you down. And, there are Scouts who don’t honor their oath, their vow, their promise, their law. That’s a fact. That’s reality

But Caleb is also reality. There are Scouts that are true Scouts. There are heroes that you can look up to. There are governments and politicians you can trust. And there are Christian Churches worthy of that name.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Every day of Lent we send out an email devotion written by one of our Church members, based on Scripture I give them. I gave Sarah Schunk this powerful verse from Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one.” (Galatians 3:28) Listen to what Sarah wrote:

“Every once in a while I am blessed with a moment of light and lightness. It happens in quiet occasions at Church—up in the creaking, warm Greenfield Hill balcony I feel the heavy weight of me fall away and I am lifted. It happens at lively times too, when a remarkable piece of music or a rousing speech turns my skin into thousands of electrically charged goose bumps. My body folds into the buzzing whirl of energy that connects me with those around me, and I become, for just a moment, nothing and everything.

"I believe these seconds are a glimpse into the lasting communion God has in mind for all of us. They are moments of pure community and no identity. I am not my job, my family, or my failings. I am not my culture, my gender, or even my name. I am not Jew or Gentile, slave nor free. I am not male or female.

"While we spend a great deal of time in this world carving out our own unique identities, God also gives us the peace of a community that requires no ID. Through Jesus, I am one with the world around me. I am not asked to qualify for God's communion by proof of residence, skin color, financial statement, I.Q., or body weight. As a child of God, I was born eligible and possible. We all were."

That's us. That's a good Church, a good Troop, a good nation, a good person.

Our final hymn builds on that. Number 609, "Take My Life, and Let It Be." Look closely at the words as we sing them."

*Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in ceaseless praise,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet, and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee,
swift and beautiful for thee.*

*Take my voice, and let me sing;
unto God my praise I bring.
Take my lips, and let them be
filled with messages from thee,
filled with messages from thee.*

*Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use
every power as thou shalt choose,
every power as thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will, and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own;*

*it shall be thy royal throne,
it shall be thy royal throne.*

*Take my love, my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure-store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.*