

"DUTIFUL LIVING"
February 5, 1989

TEXT: John 15:14 "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

This morning --for very good reason-- I am going to use a "dirty" word. It is one of those four-letter words you hear about when people do not want to come right out and say it is "dirty." You know what I mean. "That movie was just full of four-letter words." Now, personally, I have never really liked that expression. You can understand why if you remember that Muth is a four letter word.

But the four-letter word I have in mind is one we rarely hear these days, even in this wide-open time when just about anything goes. Too many people seem to find it distasteful. But this morning I am going to use it anyway. The word is "duty!" D-u-t-y. Duty! On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the scout law.

As I said, it is a word we do not often hear these days. In this me-first "Now Generation" people do not like to talk of duty. Instead they much prefer to talk of rights. Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Welfare Rights, Workers' Rights; we hear about those almost every time we turn on a TV set or pick up a daily paper. But "obligation", "responsibility", "duty"; those words are different. Apparently they scare the daylights out of people. And many there are who stand up for their rights, but fall down miserably on their duties.

Such people seem to think that the University of Life is all electives and no requirements. And when asked to do something they do not want to do, they kick and pout like little children and demand accusingly, "It's my life isn't it?" But, of course, the answer is, "No!" It is not our life. Not till we learn to give it and not just take it. The Psalmist says, "Know that the Lord is God! It is He that hath made us and we are His." (Psalm 100:3) And we are endowed by our Creator, not only with "certain inalienable rights", but with some equally inescapable responsibilities.

Daniel Webster, the nineteenth century American statesman, wrote, "A sense of duty pursues us ever. It is omnipotent, like the Deity. If we take to ourselves the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, duty performed or violated is still with us, for our happiness or our misery. If we say the darkness shall cover us, in the darkness, as in the

light, our obligations are yet with us." And Henry Ward Beecher added, "Your daily duties are a part of your religious life just as much as your devotions."

That being the case, we should not be surprised that the Bible has a good deal to say about duty. It says, for instance, "And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 6:18) That is our duty. It also says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:5-7) That is our duty, too.

And who has never heard these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . . You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain . . . Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy . . . Honor your father and your mother . . . You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:2-17) Some there are who would like to call these the "Ten Suggestions", but we know better. "Commandments" we call them, and commandments they are. And every Jew and Christian is duty-bound to obey them.

Oh, but some may say, "That's Old Testament stuff. That has nothing to do with us." (How easily we rationalize the things we want to believe!) But Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17)

And, in this morning's scripture we heard him say, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Now, at first, that might sound a bit extreme. Have we not always been taught that friends should be understanding? That their friendship should not depend on always getting their own way? But look at it this way. Would you say that someone was a good friend who was always going against your wishes and doing things to embarrass you?

Or would you say that someone was a friend of this country if he constantly broke its laws and went against its best interests? Of course not. Jesus did not say, "I will like you only if you do as I tell you." He said that if we are his friends, we will follow his commandments. It is our duty to do so. Even Thomas Paine, renowned as a skeptic, knew that. He wrote, "The duty of man is plain and simple, and consists of but two points: his duty to God, which every man must feel; and his duty to his neighbor --to do as he would be done by."

You see, duty is not something to bind and restrict us. Nor should we picture her as a stern taskmistress. She is rather a kind and sympathetic mother, ever ready to shelter us and guide us in the paths of peace." So Thomas Carlyle wrote, "Let him who gropes painfully in darkness of uncertain light . . . lay this precept well to heart: Do the duty which lieth nearest to thee, which thou knowest to be a duty. Thy second duty will already have become clearer."

No footsoldier can expect to know exactly why this hill has to be defended or that hill taken. But he does not have to know. He only has to do his duty. And so do we. In Abraham Lincoln's words, "Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Those words, of course, were spoken in the midst of our great Civil War. But duty is not for war alone. Every man, woman, and child has a duty, in peacetime and in war. And sometimes it may involve great acts of bravery, as in this story so well known to anyone who ever served in the Coast Guard.

During a heavy fog a ship came too close to the New England coast, and the gale blew her on the rocks offshore. The Coast Guard arrived and surveyed the situation. The group, though under the command of a veteran captain, included several new men. And one of these, with white face, said to the Captain, 'Sir, the wind is offshore, and the tide is running out. We can go out, but what good will it do? Against this wind and tide we cannot come back.' But the captain just replied, 'Launch the boat.' We have to go out. We don't have to come back.'

But often our duty comes clothed in plainer garb. In one of the Bible's least understood passages, the author of Colossians writes, "Wives, be subject to you husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord." (Colossians 3:18-22)

That text is not preached on much these days. For one thing, the women of the congregation would probably not stand for it. We no longer think it a wife's duty to be subject to her husband. And we do not believe in slavery at all. But that is not the point. The point is that everyone, in whatever state we find ourselves, has his or her duty. And by doing that duty we please the Lord. So that passage goes on to say, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men"
"(Colossians 3:23-24)

Of course, we have our rights. And we must never let anyone take them from us. But sometimes we may need to lay them down in behalf of the greater good. For rights alone can never bring peace or happiness. If you have been following carefully, you

will know that this is the last in a series of five sermons: "Purposeful Living", "Powerful Living", "Peaceful Living", "Joyful Living", and now "Dutiful Living." Of the five, most people no doubt prefer to hear of power, and peace, and joy. But none of these can truly be ours unless they come wrapped in purpose and duty. "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men "