

"Call to Duty"

Luke 17:5-10

October 5, 2025

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

I had no idea how close I came to a popular video game with the title of this sermon until I started doing my homework. "Call **of** Duty" is a very popular video game and a science fiction movie.

Closer to what I was thinking about was a "call to **active** duty," a military concept whereby a reservist becomes active. But that's not quite it, either. And in the current politically-charged environment of the deployment of some National Guard troops, that is probably not helpful, either.

But I stuck with this title because in this passage from Luke, the "call to duty" is what Jesus says discipleship should be about. We shouldn't be looking for praise, he says. In fact, when we do everything we are commended to do, we should say "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"

As you might imagine, this passage does not make the "Top Ten" list of popular inspirational scriptures. It's problematic for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that we don't have slaves and we think slavery is repugnant. This country fought a war with itself, the war with the greatest number of American casualties we ever sustained, killed and wounded, because all the combatants were American. And we fought it, despite the writings of some revisionists who made it about "states rights," to make sure that the scourge of slavery would forever be ended in America.

This is not to say, in a more light-hearted fashion, that some of us don't feel like slaves at times, whether in our families or on the job. The phrase in my multi-racial household is that we sometimes feel like indentured servants.

This feeling of self-deprecation is another reason the passage is a problem. For folks with low self-esteem, who have been emotionally or physically beaten at work or at home, a Lord who asks us to call ourselves

“worthless slaves” makes us quake. As it should. No one should be abused; nor would the Lord Jesus Christ want us to be.

And then there are all the Biblical passages – how much time do we have? – about our being created in the image of God, being children of God, being able to do greater things than God (another Jesus saying, by the way) that stand opposite of the words of this teaching.

So what gives?

This sermon originally had the laborious title of *“Call to Duty or Encouraging the Heart?”* Too long, I decided, and who would care? But that original title reveals the tension in the text and in our lives.

On the one hand, we are called to do our duty as disciples. Since the title has military overtones, a military story: the 1805 naval Battle of Trafalgar determined the supremacy of British naval power during the Napoleonic wars. The British victory over a combined French and Spanish fleet guaranteed that Napoleon Bonaparte would not be able to invade Britain. Just before the battle, the flagship *“Victory”* of British Admiral Lord Nelson raised semaphore flags that spelled out a simple message for the fleet’s sailors: *“England expects that every man will do his duty.”* They did. None of the 27 British ships were lost, though 19 of the 33 French and Spanish ships were sunk.

The image of warfare may repulse us but the call to duty should not. We live in a time when Christians find themselves attacked by “the cultured despisers of religion,” (1) those apathetic to religion or wholly secular. At times we have to stand up for our faith when it is uncomfortable.

That happened to me this week. Let me first say something you’ve likely heard me say before, which is that I do my best thinking after the meeting. Let me also say that I don’t like conflict. So last Wednesday, when I stopped at my local deli in Woodbridge to pick up an egg and bacon sandwich on the way to a meeting, I was stunned when the owner gave me my sandwich with a side order of a racist joke. I was so surprised that the best I could stammer out before leaving was, “Oh, whatever.”

(1) Schleiermacher, Friedrich On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, Berlin, 1799.

I was barely out the door when I knew I'd have to go back, in part because of our Monday study of the Methodist General Rules and Rule #1, *"Do No Harm."* Not doing harm is not just avoiding being actively vengeful, unkind and so forth, but not doing harm is also not passively accepting harm. In the words of the baptismal liturgy, we are called to *"resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves."*

Like I said, I do my best thinking after the meeting. And I also knew that people put on the defensive are seldom inclined to change their thinking. So when I returned four hours later he said, *"Oh, you're back."* I said, *"Yes, I've just come back to tell you that I didn't appreciate the racist joke you told me."* He said, *"It was just a joke."* I said, *"But it wasn't funny."* He said, *"I told you, no prejudice."* I said, *"Yes, you did, but it was; and I didn't appreciate it."* At that point he finally said, *"Sorry."*

My hope is that, as Proverbs 15:1 declares, *"A soft word turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger."* I hope he will consider his words. And I will not be returning to his deli, at least not to make a purchase. Which is too bad, because they do make a good breakfast sandwich. But not with a side of racism.

So we have to be about justice, but also about the care and feeding of souls. Most of us are not born with a soldier's or a first responders' resolute sense of duty. Most of us need our hearts and our faith to be encouraged. That's why this passage begins with the disciples saying to Jesus *"Lord, increase our faith."*

Jesus knew all about the naysayers and the negative Neds and Nellies. Many of us are here because we've come through tough times by the grace of God, by the power of the Risen Christ, by the compassion of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. That sense drives us to the need for strengthened faith. That is well and good.

But Jesus pushes further. This should not be a terrible surprise, knowing that his own call to duty took him to the cross, there—though innocent of any crime—to suffer and die for our redemption. Therefore, those who follow him are also called to push further, to delve deeper. There is nothing wrong with obtaining spiritual encouragement in worship. In fact, when we praise God and give God the glory, there is a

lightness that comes with knowing that it doesn't all depend on us and that God's strength is sufficient for our need.

But if that is **all** we're here for—if we come to worship only to **get** a lift but never to **give** a lift—then we've come to the wrong place. If we never serve on a committee, never hold office, never stay for fellowship, never support a mission effort, we have missed Jesus' call. God is not looking for a contribution in exchange for a warmed heart. God is looking for a commitment that arises from a changed life.

You can see the difference in an egg and bacon sandwich. The farmer said to his farmyard, *"Animals, I'd like some eggs and ham for breakfast."* *"Great idea,"* said the chicken. *"Easy for you to say,"* said the pig. *"For you, chicken, eggs and ham is a contribution. For me, it's a total commitment."*

I wish it was easier. But it isn't. It never has been. That's what the cross is about. That's what Communion is about, Christ's body broken for you and me, and Christ's blood shed for you and me. Call to duty. Will we answer?