

“Obedience”

Psalm 32; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

February 22, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

It happened one too many times.

I live on a road that is a “cut through” between State Route 63 and Newton Road in Woodbridge. (It’s actually one road with two names, but that’s a whole other story.)

One day, as I have many times before, I activated my turn signal and slowed from the posted 25 mile an hour speed limit to turn right into my driveway. And as has happened many times before, a car that had started far behind me was now on my bumper, just itching to get by.

Usually they slow down as I turn, but this one was different. It was a white panel truck. It did not slow down. It sped up, gunned the engine, crossed the solid yellow center line and swerved within what seemed inches of my rear bumper as it went whizzing up the hill. The message was clear, as it so often is with tailgaters: *“Get out of my way.”*

It happened one too many times.

I went immediately to the police station, reported the incident, and over the next several weeks, working with Woodbridge police, got a portable speed trailer installed on our property and a police presence nearby. Whether they made any arrests I do not know. But I did notice slower speeds on my street, so perhaps it did some good. With walkers and runners on that street even in the cold weather, it might even have saved lives.

I marvel at the frenzy with which drivers, as my late father used to say, *“go rushing to the grave.”*

Then I thought, *“Maybe it’s me.”* Maybe I expect people to leave too much room behind me. I was taught *“one car length for every ten miles per hour.”* Since my SUV is 15 feet long, I leave 45 feet at 30 miles per hour and 90 feet—the distance from home to first base on a baseball diamond—at 60 miles per hour. Perhaps in this electronic and digital era with collision sensing and driver-assist devices that’s too much.

Nope. In fact, it’s not enough. Multiple websites (1) cite the two-second rule as a minimum, the 3-second rule as desirable: leaving two or three

(1) www.smartmotorist.com

seconds from when the car in front of you passes a fixed point to when you pass the same point, under dry and clear conditions. A vehicle travelling 30 miles per hour goes 44 feet in a second (2). So a safe distance on my street is roughly the distance from the foot of the chancel to our back pew. Times 3! And if I'm doing 60 mph it's the distance from the 20-yard line to the goal line on a football field. I can imagine what you're thinking: "*Who does that?*" Right! Not even infuriated, thinking-they-are-law-abiding pastors.

Our disobedience is as old as humankind. The narrative from Genesis couldn't make it clearer. This disobedience is the "original sin" of which the Bible speaks. Not so-called "sins of the flesh." Not the nakedness of which Adam and Eve became self-aware. But disobedience. God says, "*Here's the garden, folks. Till it and keep it. Eat of every tree in the garden except one.*" Guess what tree our ancestors ate from?

God said Adam and Eve would die if they ate of the fruit of the tree in the center of the garden. But they didn't die, at least not right away. Why not? The Hebrew word for "die," "muwth" (mooth) can mean literal or figurative death. So does it mean we lost immortality, or just innocence? Perhaps both. Most of all, we lost a relationship of trust in, and with, our Creator.

The dialogue between the serpent and Eve makes it even more interesting. The serpent comes sowing doubt and hesitation. Maybe God didn't say, "*You shall not eat from any tree in the garden.*" Maybe that's just what you thought God said. Note how Eve replies: "*God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'*" (Genesis 3:3) You can search Genesis 2:17 until your eyes ache, but you will not find God saying "*nor shall you touch it.*" Already Eve is taking a simple message and adding to it, making it more complicated than it needs to be, something we sometimes do when we don't want to comply.

None of this is to say that we should slavishly follow rules without questioning them or check our brains at the door. Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds. But it does truly amaze me when people will work harder at a complex act of disobedience than a simple act of obedience. I will not tell you how many of our sons we battled with through high school to simply do their homework. I will simply tell you that we battled. How much simpler it would have been if they had just done their homework! Obedience acknowledges boundaries, manages expectations and frees us to focus our energy on building on the gifts God has given us.

Here's a fun story from Carol's son Aaron's high school racing days. His coach, Thom Jacobs, was an excellent coach. He tells his athletes they are gentlemen first, scholars second and athletes third. He is a passionate teacher with high standards and the expectation of obedience. As such, his intensity can be intimidating.

Carol and I watched at one outdoor meet when Coach Jacobs suddenly crosses the field yelling at one of his racers: *"Tuck in that jersey! Do not leave that jersey hanging out! I told you how to dress and you will dress the way I tell you to dress! This is not your prom!"* By that time he reached the grandstands where we were and, seeing us, stepped up next to us. Shocked at his intensity, we didn't know what to expect. He continued in a completely different tone and, without missing a beat, said calmly, *"So, Aaron is racing very well!"*

Why was Coach Jacobs so upset at this other young man? Perhaps he was annoyed at the disobedience and possible disrespect. Perhaps this was not the first offense. But, most importantly, that jersey that hung down covered the young man's racing number. When a racing number is obscured, a racer can be disqualified. Not only would the young man lose the event, the entire TEAM might miss the chance to gain points toward winning the meet. Our disobedience can leave us losing, or lost, in the race of life.

Obedience can also help us avoid overthinking. For some families, every Sunday is a battle: do we go to church or not? The household I grew up in simply went to church. It was non-negotiable. When we grew up and moved away, it became our decision. Until then, we weren't allowed to decide whether we'd go to school so we weren't going to be allowed to decide about church, either.

One such battle unfolded between parent and child. *"I don't want to go to church,"* cried the child. *"But honey,"* said the parent, *"we have to go to church."* The child replied, *"Why? Give me three reasons."* The parent answered, *"First, it's what we do. It's Sunday: we go to church. Second, they love you down there. If you're not there they'll miss you and ask me where you are. Third, you are 42 years old and the pastor of the church."*

Obedience extends well beyond ritual practice, of course, to the essence of who we are and Whose we are. Let's turn to Matthew's Gospel. In it, Jesus' obedience to God and his fight against temptation is expressed in three important ways:

First, he was obedient to God's leading. This is no small thing. The passage begins, "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" We all want to be led by God as long as God's leading is to comfort and peace. What about when it is to wilderness and temptation? When we are in the wilderness or tempted—things most of us want to avoid—can we reframe it to consider that God is leading us, either purposefully teaching us or protecting us as we journey?

Second, Jesus was obedient to his understanding that he was God's son, the Beloved. This declaration will sound familiar if you were here last Sunday or know the story of Jesus' Transfiguration (**Matthew 17:1-9**). But Jesus heard it first at his baptism, which immediately precedes this story of temptation. His affirmation as God's beloved stays with him, and Jesus was not distracted when the Adversary said, "*If you are the Son of God....*" Jesus knew exactly who he was and, despite all temptations, he knew that he and God had **that!**

Third, Jesus was obedient to scripture. Three times Satan tried to take Jesus off his godly course, and each time Jesus reaches deep into scripture to be faithful to God's calling. Jesus knew the texts of his faith. Do we? From time to time I print this reminder: "*Advance reading of the scripture is an act of spiritual formation.*" Besides reading the texts for each week's worship, you've been invited to use the WUMC Lenten devotional, which has reflections on particular scripture passages. The reading of scripture is spiritual strength training. Jesus used them as power and resistance to evil in the time of trial. We should too.

Lent has begun: a time for reflecting again on our rebellion and disobedience against the best God would have us be. It is a time when we can choose obedience to a loving God, who also has high expectations and hopes for us. It is a time when, considering the example of Jesus, we listen for God's leading, know our identity as beloved sons and daughters of the Most High God, and call on spiritual resources, particularly Scripture, to ward off temptation. As we do these things, our Lenten journey begins, seeking fidelity to the love, sacrifice, service and—yes—obedience that God asks of us. Amen.