

**“Just to Make It Interesting”**  
**Judges 7:2-8a; Mark 6:1-6**

They first convened on Mother’s Day, 1947. The beloved pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, Charles Nabers, had requested a get together of all who might be interested in beginning a church out in the new, growing, Augusta Road area of town. They were an ordinary looking group. Mostly young, the adjectives of wealthy or prominent, or politically connected, or community leader would not yet be applied to them. But among those gathered there reverberated a spirit of beginning something new, of planting a possibility, of stepping out in faith, of following God.

Like most of God’s work, Westminster Presbyterian Church did not begin with the idea of being something special, or big, or influential, but simply as an attempt to speak God’s word and do God’s will. And today, most of the programs that we remember as monumental achievements were begun simply because the members of this church believed they would demonstrate God’s word by helping the Greenville community.

In 1962, this congregation of 722 members made a commitment in today’s figures of over five million dollars, so this church, its sanctuary and bell tower would stand as a beacon proclaiming the love of Jesus Christ.

In 1968, after being turned down by numerous other churches, Westminster gave over its kitchen and office space so that Meals on Wheels could begin its program of feeding the elderly.

In 1986, Westminster pledged \$100,000 and legal support so that the Earle Street apartments could be renovated for those who attend Gateway House, a program for individuals who struggle with mental illness.

In the 1990’s, culminating almost two decades of involvement in the Pleasant Valley Community, Westminster gave the leadership and financial backing that drew the city, county, and United Way into constructing a preschool and community building.

Last year, in difficult economic times, this church, you committed over six million dollars for sanctuary renovations and missions, so that more people could hear about and come to know the love and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ.

Wells in Senegal, schools and feeding programs in the Dominican Republic, a clinic in Malawi, support for Thornwell Home for Children, theological seminaries, United Ministries, a weekday school teaching and caring for children, the list could go on and on and on with today this church providing over one half a million dollars a year to help people here in Greenville and all over the world.

And it has all occurred because from that little group on Mother’s Day in 1947 to today, the members of this church simply and humbly turned to God and asked: “What would you have us do?”

Well, in our scripture, a small army is used by God to defeat the dreaded Midianites. Yet, their accomplishment comes not because of any great decisions on their part, but because they simply allowed God to work through them. The theme of our sermon is that God makes all accomplishments possible, but God works through us to make them happen.

Today's scripture focuses on Gideon, who is one of the judges, a group that functioned as leaders between the time of Joshua and the installation of Israel's first King, Saul. We believe Gideon lived from the early to the mid eleventh century B.C. A member of the Israelite Manasseh tribe, he appears in the scripture as the Midianites are culminating seven years of riding their camels into the Israelites' fields during the harvest. With no standing army to resist the invaders, the Israelites must flee to the hills and live in caves while the Midianites confiscate the harvest, driving the Israelites toward starvation.

An angel appears to Gideon while he is trying to hide some wheat from the Midianites and informs him God has chosen him to deliver the Israelites. Well, Gideon demands a sign so he will know this word is from the Lord, one of several times in the story he will seek reassurance. He gets it. And the first thing God wants him to do is destroy the shrine to the pagan god, Baal.

There is a slight problem in that Gideon's father is the owner of the shrine. But he follows through, although he waits until night, just to take no unnecessary risks. Fortunately, he possesses an understanding father who upon viewing the destruction says to the blood thirsty crowd, "Leave Gideon alone. If the god, Baal, wants to punish him, let him do it himself."

Well, the Midianites and their allies encamp in the Valley of Jezreel. The Bible says they are 120,000 strong. Convinced God is on his side, Gideon gathers 32,000 troops.

Now, just a word about biblical numbers. Numbers are a constant source of consternation for biblical scholars. Often they contradict one another. Sometimes they seem outlandish. For instance, we are told the Midianites, a small group on Israel's eastern boundary, collected an army of 120,000 men. For comparison, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, in the time of Jesus, when the Roman Empire stretched from Britain to Syria, from Spain to Turkey, from Egypt to Germany, there were twenty-five legions in the entire Roman Army, or about 150,000 men guarding most of the known world and engaging in various military campaigns. We also know that 1000 years before the Romans, during Gideon's time, a large army would have been 300 men.

So, was there actually a Midianite army of 120,000 men? No one knows for sure. But, whereas we 21<sup>st</sup> century westerners employ numbers as a way to insure accuracy, ancient authors also used them symbolically. And sometimes it is difficult to know which technique is being employed. So, the author's exact numbers are not as important in this passage as to tell us there was a big ole' army down in that valley.

Well, God looks at the 120,000 Midianites and the 32,000 Israelites, and says to Gideon, “There’s too many of you. If I let you defeat them with this many of you, you’ll take all the credit and think you did this without me. So, whoever is afraid, let them go home.” Twenty-two thousand soldiers say, “I’m out of here.” Ten thousand are left. Which is kind of amazing when you think about it. It seems to me anyone with any sense would have beat it.

“Well,” God says, “there’s still too many. Take them down to the water, and everyone who drinks with his hand, send home. Anyone who laps the water like a dog, keep.” Only 300 lap like a dog.

Now, through the centuries commentators have attempted to give meaning to these choices. For instance, both the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, and the church father, Theodoret, saw lapping like a dog as a way of being on the alert and fearful. Therefore, the 300 are the least ready and able-bodied. On the other hand, some commentators argue those standing and lapping were determined not to get caught off-guard, and therefore were the most intelligent and prepared.

I believe both views make this too complicated. How one drinks water is a totally random and irrelevant trait. And that is exactly the author’s point. God could use anyone to do His will. This was about God, not the soldiers.

Well, you know the ending, 300 Israelites defeat 120,000 of the enemy. God gives the victory to show His power.

A police recruit was asked during the exam, “What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?” He said, “Call for backup.”

God wanted to show that no matter who it was, God didn’t need any backup.

Now, what does this story say to us? The main thrust of the saga is sending all these soldiers home so there will be no doubt whatsoever it was God who gave the Israelites this victory. Verse two: “Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me.’”

How many of us believe our own hand has delivered us? The theological truth taught in this passage is that all of life is a gift from God. And what we achieve, what we accomplish has God as its source. We understand God’s demand that the army be shrunk until there can be no doubt whatsoever who gave the victory. We understand because we recognize that temptation in our lives.

For instance, we take pride in our academic achievements. But who gave us the gift of intellectual capability?

We are pleased when always being chosen by others. Who gave us the gift of physical attractiveness?

People proclaim you as a leader. Who gave you the gift of personality?

We have done well in our business or professions. Who gave the gift of organization?

People seek out our counsel. Who gave us the gift of wisdom?

We are the patriarch or matriarch of our clans. Who gave the gift of long life?

If Gideon and the Israelites believed their wisdom, heroism, fighting skill, or intelligence had defeated the Midianites, they would sink right back into a selfish and self serving paganism that viewed themselves as the source of the good in their lives. To whom do you and I give the credit for the victories in our lives?

Presbyterian pastor, Roger Matthews, tells about one summer traveling in the Pocono Mountains. And like a good Presbyterian family, he says, they went to church on vacation. One lazy Sunday they found their way to a little Methodist church. It was a hot day and the folks were nearly comatose in the pews. The preacher was preaching on and on until, all of a sudden, he said, "The best years of my life have been spent in the arms of another man's wife." The congregation let out a gasp, came to immediate attention, and the dozing usher in the back row dropped his hymnbook. Then the preacher said, "It was my mother." The congregation tittered a little and managed to follow along as the sermon concluded.

Matthews said he filed this trick away in his memory as a great way to get the congregation's attention back when it had been lost. Sure enough, the next summer, on a lazy Sunday, he was preaching and the flies were buzzing around and the ushers were sinking lower and lower in their seats in the back row until he could hardly see them. Then he remembered his experience in the Pocono Mountains, and he said in a booming voice, "The best years of my life have been spent in the arms of another man's wife."

Sure enough, he had their attention. One of the ushers in the back row sat up so fast he hit his head on the pew in front of him. He had them. But you know something, he forgot what came next. All he could think to say was, "And for the life of me, I can't remember her name!"

Even with our best intentions, we can quickly forget who provided the best years of our lives. But when we forget God, we distort the reality of our existences.

This biblical story strongly conveys the theological concept of God as the source of goodness and love. Yet, there is a balancing principle to this truth. Though Gideon is the hero of the story, the scripture reveals him as timid, fearful, and in constant need of reassurance. Otherwise, he's like most of the rest of us. And you can argue he received confirmation of God's favor time and again. That's right. But in the last analysis, he still had to strap on that sword and lead 300 men against 120,000.

God blesses us with countless gifts. But if they are to be used for anything more than personal self-fulfillment, we must step forward and offer them to God.

Now, it is hard to balance these opposing truths. When we view our blessings as our own making, we tend not to see any need to use them for God or

others. We earned them. Let others get their own. Or, recognizing God's gifts, we figure God can take care of Himself. So, God doesn't need us.

But, the biblical view is of human beings as channels of God's love and blessings. God gives to us so we can help others, so God's work will prosper. Intelligence, love, wisdom, physical strength, beauty, singing, writing, physical dexterity — the list of God-given gifts is endless. You and I possess the ability to make a difference, to change people's lives, to aid God in God's work. But, we must decide to strap on the sword of faith and join the battle.

One day, a poor boy who was selling goods from door to door to pay his way through school, found he had only one thin dime left, and he was hungry. He decided he would ask for a meal at the next house. However, he lost his nerve when a lovely young woman opened the door. Instead of a meal he asked for a drink of water.

She thought he looked hungry so she brought him a large glass of milk. He drank it slowly, and then asked, "How much do I owe you?" "You don't owe me anything," she replied. "Mother has taught us never to accept pay for a kindness." He said, "Then I thank you from my heart."

As Howard Kelly left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but his faith in God and humanity was strong also. He had been ready to give up and quit.

Years later that young woman became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled. They finally sent her to the big city, where they called in specialists to study her rare disease.

Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation. When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes. Immediately he rose and went down the hall of the hospital to her room. Dressed in his doctor's gown he went in to see her. He recognized her at once. He went back to the consultation room determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to the case.

After a long struggle, the battle was won. Dr. Kelly requested the business office to pass the final bill to him for approval. He looked at it, then wrote something on the edge and the bill was sent to her room. She feared to open it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it all. Finally she looked, and something caught her attention on the side of the bill.

She read these words... "Paid in full with one glass of milk."

God gives us blessings so they may be passed around and around and around, doing God's will and God's work.

"Just to Make It Interesting"

Reading this story one can almost get the impression God kept cutting down Gideon's army just to make it interesting. And sometimes, when one views the obstacles the Church faces in spreading the love of Christ to a violent, sinful world, it can look like God again is just making it interesting. Disease, hunger,

racial and ethnic hatred, murder, theft, the list of the world's 120,000 combatants seems endless. Whereas, the church's 300 soldiers look rather meager.

But the story reminds us that God is on our side. This morning, we are ordaining and installing those who will lead us into this battle. Every person in this sanctuary has received gifts to be used in the struggle to do God's will. But now, we must decide whether we will join the battle for truth and righteousness. Will you and I follow Gideon, and these elders, into the fray that will decide the spiritual and physical destiny of God's people and God's work? Are you ready to strap on the sword of faith and do battle for God?

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
March 8, 2009