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The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: "Gideon: Too Many Cooks"

Judges 7:1-21

David A. Renwick

Throughout the summer months we've been focusing on people in the Bible, characters in the Bible whose lives, whose stories, have been preserved for us in Holy Scripture. We've been thinking of these people as members of our family, our family of faith, our spiritual family, people whose lives God has given to us, just as he gives family members to us.

In the church, baptism is often a time for gathering family members around us because those members of the family will influence the life of the child who is baptized. They will have an enormous impact on that life. But so too (and this is central to the significance of baptism) will the "communion of saints," the church or the fellowship, the spiritual community within which a child is baptized and raised.

This "communion of saints," though, is not merely a communion or a fellowship of those living now, but in the case of Christian faith, goes all the way back in time to the "beginning," and all the way forward to the consummation of history. Looking back in time includes all the great characters of scripture whose lives God has given to us, to you and me, to help shape our identity as believers in God and as followers of Jesus Christ. So we've been looking at these people in our spiritual family, saying, "Lord from the good, the bad and the ugly within their lives how can my life be more like the life you want me to live?"

Today I want us to think about a person by the name of Gideon who lived probably around 1100 years or so before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ at a time when the whole people of ancient Israel were in peril. Their lives were at stake as enemies invaded their fields and communities to destroy both their crops and their lives. In fact these invaders, who generally came through the south, swept through the desert into parts of ancient Israel and they did so on their camels — which may seem to us to be rather innocuous (camels?!) but in those days camels were actually a powerful instrument of war. If you had hundreds of camels, and you enemy didn't, you could ride over pretty much anyone, just as tanks would do after their invention in the 20th century. Those who had the camels were comparable to those who are right at the forefront of the modern technology today — and the people of Israel were helpless in the face of it. People called the Midianites and the Amalekites did. But the Israelites did not, and so their lives were threatened. They were scared quite literally to death, and starvation and slaughter were everyday possibilities.

If we want to think of how serious their predicament was all we need to think about really is ISIS. Just speak of those letters and that name and you get the picture. "ISIS is coming near" — and everybody goes into panic.

The existence of ISIS too, I think (just as an aside), may help us deal a little bit with some of the more difficult passages of scripture that cause many people trouble — passages about all the slaughter in the pages of the Old Testament; all the destruction, and people being annihilated. When we think of ISIS I think we can get a feel, as perhaps we have not been able to get a feel in recent decades, for the absolute callousness with respect to life that some people can have. Hard to imagine. But now, sadly, it's here before us on our screens, so none of us has any illusions — no member of ISIS would come into our town and sit down for a nice chat on human dignity and the preservation of life. No they're going to threaten and slaughter first and there will only be time for discussion after everybody is crushed or dead. That's the kind of atmosphere in which much of the Old Testament was written. In a dog-eat-dog, survival of the most vicious world, in which life was treated with absolute contempt.

So it was in this kind of a world that Gideon rose to prominence and became a leader of the 12 tribes of Israel; it was at this difficult moment when the people of Israel were weak and were threatened by an enemy which had no respect for life whatsoever — and under his leadership (if we read the whole of the story of Gideon, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of the book of Judges) we find that the enemy surprisingly (powerful as they are) is subdued. The enemy is subdued! And for 40 years because of Gideon's leadership, the people of Israel knew peace and safety and security. And the question that arises that I want us to think about today is this:

- How did this happen?
- What was it in Gideon's life that led him to become the leader who actually transformed Israel and saved them from annihilation, from starvation and annihilation at this particular time in their history?
- What was it that God found in his life or created in his life that made him so useful as a leader of his people? So effective as a leader of his people.

GIDEON'S IMPERFECTION. One of the answers to this question can be stated in the negative — this: that it certainly was not his perfection. It was certainly not his perfection. He wasn't perfect in faith and he wasn't perfect in obedience. He actually struggled with both. In fact, in so many of the stories of the saints in the pages of Holy Scripture the scripture does not cover up the fact that the people who God uses, loves blesses and calls into his service are far from perfect and this is true in the story of Gideon too. Gideon is one of those who is far from perfect and yet his story is told, warts and all, in the pages of scripture for you and me.

In Gideon's case there are at least two flaws which come to the surface in the story; two flaws or sins in particular that emerge and one of them is quite simply the sin of idolatry.

IDOLATRY. Gideon was prone to idolatry. In later life he turned his wealth quite literally into an idol; his wealth became a distraction from the living God. Many people today tend to think of idolatry as a sin of the past, something that belongs to people who lived long ago and it

has to do with building statues of gods and goddesses — and we just don't do that kind of thing anymore. But Presbyterian theologian Jack Rogers hits the nail on the head when he says

"No, no, no! Idolatry is by no means only a thing of the past. Idolatry is the love of any-thing or any-one more than God — and each one of us surely has a little place in our lives, a space reserved for some pet love, some pet thing, some pet person, some pet habit that is more important to us than God and that dominates us, whether we want it to or not; dominates us more than God. The first commandment says 'You shall have no other gods before me,' but here is this thing or person in our lives which takes first place within our lives."

We're all called to fight against such things. We're all called to renounce such sins as this, and to repent of such things. But the good news, in the story of Gideon at least, is this: *that God did not wait for Gideon to become perfect, to love God above everything (and this is remarkable to read), did not wait for that love of God to be perfected before he called Gideon into his service.* This is a story of grace; of God coming to a person long before there is perfection.

As the apostle Paul would say; it was "while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). He didn't wait for us to be good. He didn't say "I'll send you my Son when you shape up and become good people." It was before we took any action at all that he came to us; *and in the case of Gideon it was while this idolatry was still part of his life that God comes to him and calls him into his service.*

So Gideon is flawed, and one of his flaws is idolatry. There's something else though that we see in Gideon's life that is a sign of weakness or sin and that is this: he has doubts and he has fears. He has doubts and he has fears just like so many people have doubts and fears just you and I may have doubts and fears.

DOUBTS AND FEARS. To be sure, eventually Gideon would have a great confidence in the power and in the presence and in the call of God. God's call within his life would eventually give him strength to do what others could not do. There is no question about that. Eventually that would be the case. Eventually this conviction of God's call would lead to success: so often a conviction of God's call is integral to sticking to the course with something that is difficult. But this was not the case with Gideon at first.

At first Gideon struggled with the call. Struggled to believe. Struggled with his doubts about the reality of God's interaction with and interest in his life. In fact, he even struggled despite the fact that when God came to him and said to him "I want you to lead the armies of Israel" – he did so through an angel.

I, for one, and perhaps you as well say to God often, "Lord, just send me an angel and I'll know exactly what to do." I mean that's it. Just send a real live angel like you did in the past and I will know your will perfectly. Well, Gideon is one of those to whom an angel came and he still was uncertain about, had doubts about, God's will.

Despite the angel, he was still not convinced that he was the one to lead the armies of Israel. And so when we read Judges Chapter 6, we find a story in which Gideon turns to God and speaks to God and demands of God, has the gall to demand of God, another sign as if an angel is not enough. Another sign to assure him that he has been called by God to take the lead in Ancient Israel. Let me read to you some of those verses:

Then Gideon said to God 'in order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand as you have said' [God has said it but Gideon doesn't yet believe it fully], 'I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone and it is dry on all the ground then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand as you have said.'

And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece he rung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl of water.

Then Gideon said to God, 'do not let your anger burn against me. Let me speak one more time. Let me please make trial with the fleece just once more. This time let it be dry only on the fleece and on all the ground let there be dew.'

And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only and on all the ground there was dew.

So what we discover here in this story is that God accommodated himself to Gideon's weakness. He stooped down to Gideon's level, to Gideon's imperfection, and still embraced him in his call.

That does not mean that we can do that all the time (that asking for a sign is the right thing to do), but just that God often overlooks the weakness in our faith, our faithlessness, and is so filled with grace, that he pursues us despite those weaknesses, despite those sins. To be sure we're called to repent and to grow n faith, but God does not wait for that growth to start first before he enters into our lives.

CONFIRMING GOD'S CALL. This was certainly the case with Gideon. It's just as surely the case with you and me. God says to you and me as he did to Gideon,

"I want to use you, not tomorrow but now, today. Today is the day of salvation. I come to you in grace now. I need you to say 'yes' to me right here and now. I want you, for example (and this is God's call to all of us and in this we really don't need an angel to confirm it), to think of your daily work as something you do for me — your call; not merely your job within your profession. You are to do this for me at home or at work or wherever you may be — you are to be my ambassadors of reconciliation." We don't need an angel to know that this is God's call to each of us.

To begin to think this way will lead quickly to a transformation that will change every single one of our lives: the call of God. There's no room for "I'm not perfect enough." Right here and now God calls the imperfect.

- To facilitate a small group or to host a small group within the church or within our home. 'Well I'm not sure I can do that,' we say! But, if that's what you say, just remember, you're in good company with Gideon!
- Or what about caring for the hungry? It doesn't take a degree to begin with making sandwiches for the DC streets. There are many ways in which we can say yes to God.
- Or what about the ministry of caring? Write a card to the sick and the suffering now. Not tomorrow. Not when we become better people, but now.

'I can use you,' says God to Gideon and to us, and 'I can use you now and through all your imperfections I can seek out those parts of your life that will be truly useful to me.' Business guru Peter Drucker used to say in the business world that leaders needed to "Maximize strengths (the good) and minimize weaknesses (the bad)." And God does that within your life and within my life.

Eventually one of Gideon's strengths would in fact become this conviction of God's call, though he struggled with it and had doubts and fears at first with the conviction that God had called him to lead the armies of Israel; yet eventually he would hold onto this conviction when the going got tough.

That kind of a conviction whether it's in the practical every day parts of life or to a specific job that God wants us to do, does not come to us most of the time through a visible angel who suddenly appears out of the blue, or through a fleece which is dry on the one hand or wet on the other hand.

I've shared with some of you before that God's guidance and God's call more often than not come from what I call the BBC. Not from NBC, or CBS or ABC – you might expect this from me – but from the BBC: B for Bible; B for other believers' and C for our conscience working in concert with each other. So that God wants to influence our consciences, bringing us a conviction of his call, but he wants to do it through our reading of scripture, and especially when we read it with other people. Sometimes our own personal judgment is flawed so we can read the scripture and we can make of it what we want. But when we read of it within the community of saints, within a small group, within a Sunday school class together others, so often God's will begins to emerge and our conviction can become strong, and we can have a certainty that what's in our conscience is not just 'what we want', or not just our wishful thinking, but the will of Almighty God. The BBC. And within that process of discernment those believers actually do become angels for us. The word *angel* in Greek simply means 'messenger.' There are messengers of God all around about us. God has given us each other to be messengers of his call as we interact spiritually, read the scripture, study together and ask God to impact our hearts and our minds.

GIDEON'S HUMILITY. So Gideon became convinced of God's call – eventually. And God used this conviction in making him successful. But more than that as we read the story and our particular passage of scripture today, the aspect of Gideon's life that God used more than any

other, that enabled him to turn the tables on God's enemies and to make Gideon's leadership great and effective, was surely his humility. His (slow in coming) utter dependence on God.

Humility in this case does not mean groveling on the ground as if we were saying I'm absolutely nothing and I'm worthless. No this humility says "I've got many gifts and I've got many talents. I've got many strengths and many experiences, but for all the things I know and can do God knows and can do far more than! God sees a picture, a broad picture that I can only glimpse, that I can only begin to glimpse; so that for all the good things God has given me and the training I've received, my knowledge, my understanding, my strength and my insight are small compared to that of Almighty God and therefore my life is dependent utterly and ultimately on him.

JUDGES 6. So we have this great story that we read in our scripture reading this morning in Judges 7 where Gideon is convinced of God's call to leadership by this time and he mobilizes his troops. He has 30,000 troops to mobilize from the tribes of Ancient Israel and he plans to make war with this army against the Midianites and the Amalekites, these desert raiders on their camels, who have four times as many soldiers at least than he has. He plans to make war against them; and God stops him in his tracks and says "Too many cooks. Too many troops. Too many soldiers to fight this battle. You need to shrink the number down." Not too few, as common sense would say, but too many. And Gideon is willing to listen because he has the humility to believe that the battle is not ultimately his, but God's.

Of course, most of the time, God uses "normal means": all of our skills and our strengths and our experiences. But it's critical to remember that God is at work in and through and over and above and sometimes despite those things that we bring to the table.

So Gideon has the humility to listen to God this time, and to believe what God says, and to cut the troops down to 20,000 and then, almost inconceivably, to 300. And then God says "let me show you what's really going on. What you cannot see. Let me take you as it were behind the scenes" . . . On the outside what you see are enemy troops that look strong and powerful and they almost inevitably are going to win; and while you're going to be a hero and go into the battle but it looks to you that you are going to lose against these overwhelming odds. But on the inside there is plenty of fear and anxiety that you cannot see in that camp, in the very camp that appears so powerful. There is fear and anxiety. "You see only the outside. I see it all," says God. And the way to win this particular battle is not just with your weapons of war, not just with a full frontal assault but by multiplying and exacerbating by stirring up the fear and the anxiety that is already there. Turn it into a panic and they will flee. And in this, embracing this insight, Gideon now trusts God.

- He abandons his usual protocol, the usual protocol of any military leader.
- He cuts his army down again and again.
- He splits the 300 up into groups of 100; he equips them not with swords and instruments of war but with torches and with trumpets and he creates a scene in the night that makes it look as if there are tens of thousands of Israelites and they are completely surrounding

ready to overwhelm the camp of the Midianites and the Amelikitites and he scares the "he-be-gee-bees" out of them with what goes on!!

Listen to that part of the story again:

“So Gideon and the hundred who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp just before midnight when they just set the watch and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. All three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars holding in their left hand the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow and they cried ‘a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. Every man stood in his place surrounding the camp. And all the men in the camp ran. They cried out and fled.’”

In his book, What Got You Here Won't Get You There, executive mentor, Marshall Goldsmith, writes this. He says (p.16-17)

“All of us in the workplace delude ourselves about our achievements, our status and our contributions. We overestimate our contribution to a project. We take credit partial or complete for successes that truly belong to others. We have an elevated opinion of our professional skills and our standing among our peers. We conveniently ignore the costly failures and time consuming dead ends we have created. We exaggerate our projects' impact on net profits because we discount the real and hidden costs built into them; the costs are someone else's problems, the successes are ours.”

This is quite a list. But what he goes on to say is this, that success in leadership (and he's writing especially for those who are already successful to a certain degree), if you want to keep on being effective, depends on your willingness to believe this to be the truth, and to eat humble pie; to acknowledge that we don't know it all, and that there are weaknesses and sins in our lives too, that will cripple us if we don't seek them out and confess them and expose them.

Now Goldsmith is certainly not writing for a specifically Christian audience, but what he is saying is exactly what the scripture says about sin – that whether we see it or not we must believe that it is true, that there are sins in our lives that need to be rooted out, exposed, confessed and dealt with, done away with; and that we need help to do this. We have to humble ourselves before God says 1st Peter 5:6 — and Gideon for all his flaws: his idolatry, his doubts, his demands on God, does this. He has humility and a dependence on God which acknowledges that God knows far more than he does: if he does not depend on God he will fail. But if he does depend on God, he will succeed: and he did.

This caused him, by the way, to change his plans in public. This is one of the hardest things to do.

- Plan A we're going to take them on. They have 135,000 we have 30,000. Let's go to it.
- Plan B. On second thoughts, let's shrink this down to 300.

Imagine the conversation amongst the troops at that change! Does he have any clue what he's doing?

So Gideon says, “Plan B: this is what we’re going to do! God sees what we do not see.” Gideon, flawed, deeply flawed, yet coming to a conviction of God’s call that would see him through really tough times and humble enough to know that there is another who sees what we do not yet see and our lives are to be lived under the rule, the sovereign sway of this remarkable gracious and loving God.

May God help us to remember that this Gideon is part of our family and from his life we are to grow in faith and grace every day.

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800