

Judges 6:36-7:8—Strength Through Weakness

A few minutes ago, you heard these wonderful passages from the book of Judges focusing on Gideon and his interaction with God about a very important matter that necessitated both a very practical solution and deep spiritual insight.

However, before we jump into this passage and see what God wants us to learn from it today, let's take a look at a video reminiscent of a ministry in this church that is both practical and spiritually based—Faithful Hands—which is comprised of small groups of Christian men dedicated to once monthly help with home repairs primarily for the elderly and single moms. Enjoy!

Youtube—Tim the Toolman Allen

All kidding aside, Faithful Hands is a wonderful ministry made up of ordinary Christian men that has blessed many people inside and outside the church. Today in this sermon we will look at the heart of all practical ministries and how God uses many of us, even in our weaknesses, to grow in love for Him and to help others.

Back to Gideon. In the two passages we heard read, we get an insight into the character and psychological makeup of Gideon, as well as at least one instance of the process God went through to help a hesitant and insecure Gideon become more trusting. At the same time, God addressed the very practical problem of developing a process for selecting men who would be appropriate to overtake Midian and thereby protect Israel.

In the first passage, namely, Judges 6:36-40, we encounter a familiar biblical motif of the hesitant or insecure hero. Jewish hearers of this passage would have been reminded of Moses. Another way to characterize this motif is that God's focus is not always on our strengths, but the strength He gives to us to do His righteous will, regardless of our innate weaknesses and flaws.

Gideon is a perfect example of this because he is such a clearly flawed character—in many ways weak, hesitant, untrusting and doubtful about whether God is really calling him to protect Israel. And like so many of us, this flawed character tests others in the hope of getting certainty. In Gideon's case, he gives God two tests—just to be sure about what God's true intention is for him. Gideon's primary problem is not that he is utterly faithless or lacks the spirit of God within him. In fact in verse 34, the verse immediately prior to the passage on which we are now focused, Gideon is described as having the spirit of God enveloping him. So, it is not that Gideon completely lacks the spirit of God, it is just that Gideon is timid and spiritually immature, like everyone in this room, and he wants a sign from God to reassure him.

Gideon not only chose two tests to pose to God but he chose two contradictory tests. In the first test Gideon places sheep's wool on the floor and, if God can make only the fleece wet while leaving the floor dry, then Gideon will know that God wants him to deliver Israel. God passes the test. In the second test the fleece is placed on the floor and, if it remains dry while the floor becomes wet, then Gideon knows God's will. For God this is tchotchke, so of course, He passes the second test.

We hope that Gideon is slowly learning that God is not some abstract disinterested power in the universe, but actually a being in relationship with him, a being who hears him, intimately cares about him and Israel and who is fully capable of detailed personal focus, while at the same time governing the universe and suspending its law when He wants. I think there is perhaps a deeper lesson here and that is that God often shows favor to people with major weaknesses but who are humbly aware of those weaknesses. God often chooses them to do great things to glorify Him to a world that does not know Him and too often focuses on worldly power. Sometimes God chooses just one weak person, or a small group of weak people, to do unbelievably great things for His Kingdom and to glorify Him.

Paul points out this same fact in slightly different words in II Corinthians 4:5-7

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

What is the treasure in us to which Paul points? It is actually nothing about us at all, but rather it is the light of Christ that shines through our heart. What are we? We are jars of clay. Why? Because a jar of clay is fragile, destined to be cracked and broken, seemingly of no value or use to us. But then we see ourselves through perceptions distorted by a fallen mind. God sees us differently. In our fragility, in our weaknesses and brokenness, the extraordinary power of God is brought to light. Through the cracks in our character, the light of Christ can shine because our weaknesses do not command the attention and admiration of others and confuse them. Quite the contrary, the obvious cracks in our character make it difficult for us to point to ourselves as glorious, but instead become a flawed avenue to demonstrate the extraordinary power that God can demonstrate in, through and despite our flaws.

We live after the fall and are so deeply flawed that we take this beautiful truth that God uses our brokenness in a wonderful way and we twist it to make it ugly. We can do this in several ways, two of which I would like to mention. First, when we become aware of our weaknesses and brokenness, we may despair, which is utterly narcissistic. The cause of despair is that we focus on the self and see the self as beyond redemption, because we think that our judgment is identical to the judgment of God. God is telling us to get over ourselves. He would have us focus on His loving forgiveness rather than totally on what a mess we are. Why would He want to do that? He knows that His loving forgiveness toward us is a real solution to our problem. Bottom line: it is not about you or me; it is about him and what he does through us with each other when we let Him.

Another twisted path we can take is to deny our brokenness and to project that brokenness onto others. Jesus knew this was our tendency and that is why He told us not to focus on the speck in our brother's eye when there is this big hulking log in our own eye. One way for you to become aware of the log in your eye is to try to be brutally honest with yourself in how you answer the following question: To whom do you feel superior?

- Criminals
- Physically, emotionally, or mentally challenged individuals

- Street people
- Alcoholics/drug addicts
- Arabs/Mexicans who sneak across the border/or anyone else you think of as a foreigner
- People who listen to country & western music/who like praise music/people who only listen to the old Gospel hymns/people who hate all music
- People in red states/people in blue states
- People whose occupation we don't talk about in polite company
- People who watch FOX News/people who watch MSNBC
- Or every other person on the globe but yourself

When you answer this question in a moment of brutal honesty you get a glimpse of the wicked forms of denial in us that Jesus warned us about. It's time to get in the real world and be responsible for seeing yourself as you really are. I am not saying that we glorify our weakness; that would be silly. I am saying that it would be a good idea to be realistic about how God can even use our weakness. Seriously, take a look at God's cast of characters in the greatest story ever told:

- Prostitutes, cripples, lepers, the blind, the deaf, the dead, the despised, the enemy, the lost, the despairing, the possessed, the mentally ill, thieves, pretty much all kinds of broken people to be major characters in the greatest story ever told....

If God can use them, God can use you and me. Like Gideon and all these characters, we don't have to have it all together, and that's a good thing because we never will. So we can't legitimately say that we don't have what it takes to do God's work on this earth. Why not? Because it is not what we have; it is what He gives us. So God continues to use a motley crew to get the job done. This is good news. It means that you and I clearly have the skill set for the job.

In the first few verses of Judges chapter 7, it is the morning after Gideon tested God. Picture it! Gideon has 32,000 men ready to go into battle. He must have thought that having all those men was an answer to prayer because Gideon, like many of us, probably thought that bigger is better, bigger is more powerful, bigger will protect and save us. God had a truly bigger picture on which He focused. He knew how those in the army and those who knew about the army would interpret a victory against the Midianites if Gideon used this 32,000 member army. God knew that if they won, they would erroneously believe that it was all about them—their cleverness, their power, their gifts and talents. So, God gave Gideon some steps to reduce the crowd of 32,000 to a mere 300 men, so that it would be clear that the victory was through God, not through their strength alone.

The past few months I have become keenly aware of this dynamic in the way that God works. As many of you know, I have spent more than 25 years studying, teaching, and writing in the area of Islamic studies. This summer I participated in an interesting group of people to assess conversions—Christians to Muslims and Muslims to Christians. It was in that setting that I met David Garrison who is writing a book entitled, [A Wind in the House of Islam](#). I have had fun since meeting him analyzing the data he

presented vis-à-vis the traditional models of missions to Muslims. What I found was quite interesting to me and I hope to you.

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, who died in 632, started a faith that nearly from its beginning had ongoing interactions between Muslims and Christians—some good, some bad. If we look at the first 1,000 years of that interaction, tens of thousands of Christians embraced Islam for whatever reasons—some through force but most not through force. In that same time period, not a single movement to Christ by Muslims took place. David stipulatively defines a movement as at least 1,000 conversions over the period of a decade.

So what do David's data show:

Slide: Muslim Movements to Christ

1. In the first 1,000 years of Islam there were no movements of conversions to Christ among Muslims.
2. In the first 1,300 years there was one movement and that was in Indonesia in the late 19th and 20th centuries.
3. By 1965 there was one more such movement in Indonesia for a total of two since the year 632.
4. In the 1980's and 90's there were eight additional movements that took place in Iran, Algeria, Bangladesh, and Central Asia. So by the close of the 20th century there were 10 movements since the beginning of Islam.
5. In the first twelve years of the 21st century there were more than 70 new movements throughout the Islamic world.

These are fascinating statistics, but they do not reveal what the causes of the explosion in the recent movements are. Here is what I discovered: up until the end of the 20th century, the way Christians tended to be in relationship with Muslims was by emphasizing power, argument, apologetics, confrontation, and training people to critique Muhammad and the Qur'an in the hope of showing the superiority of Christianity over Islam. As David's data have pointed out, during that long period of time, there were virtually no large Muslim movements to embrace Christianity. In fact, millions of Christians became Muslims and Muslim animosity toward Christians grew and deepened for all kinds of reasons and vice-versa

Then in the late 20th century, Christians changed the way they interacted with Muslims—moving away from power to love. They began to share stories about Jesus, rather than delivering crushing arguments and criticizing Muhammad, they began loving Muslims rather than attempting to show how wrong and illogical Muslims were theologically. They began to discuss life openly and deeply without avoiding the truth and sticky theological differences, but also without emotionally divisive arguments. Christians risked entering into messy relationships with Muslims, rather than taking a paternalistic stance of superiority toward them. All in all, these Christians shifted away from focusing on the power of their arguments to the power of sharing their messy lives through which God has worked in the person of Jesus.

It has been touching to see the shift, the qualitative shift in the type of individuals who are interacting with Muslims. They are more loving, more intellectually prepared, more culturally aware, more willing to hang out with Muslims and talk about the challenges of life and the fears and inadequacies that they and we have deep down. But more surprisingly for me was how this new wave of Christians is made up of self-aware broken people, many of whom do not come from a traditional Christian background, but found Jesus in the midst of brokenness. They are up front and honest about their brokenness and are willing to share that and let the light of Christ shine through them—the very reality that Paul mentioned in II Corinthians 4.

As I was thinking and praying about these issues and asking for God’s enlightenment, a funny thought came to me. It shows how God uses my very simple and silly mind. I remembered a nursery rhyme that my mom and dad recited to me when I was little. You know it—Humpty Dumpty. “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.” This nursery rhyme is simple but profoundly good theology that we would do well to listen to. Here is a picture of Humpty Dumpty for you to look upon as I speak.

Slide—Humpty Dumpty #1

Sorry, wrong Humpty and Dumpty.....

Slide—Humpty Dumpty—#2

So, what is the deal with Mr. Dumpty? We have this reckless little rotund guy sitting on a wall. For us theologically or philosophically minded types, Humpty represents the entire human race. Well, like the entire human race, he experienced a fall, a big fall, a cataclysmic fall. As a result of the fall he was really messed up and badly broken. Apparently Mr. Dumpty was an egg, and an egg is a lot like a jar of clay with a bunch of cracks in it, especially when it falls. Our cracks and Mr. Dumpty’s cracks are obvious to everyone, and now the real problem begins. The most powerful people in the kingdom, the world, with all their power, wisdom, numbers, and strength couldn’t put Mr. Dumpty or us back together again. They couldn’t make him whole—the head of state couldn’t do it, the military couldn’t, doctors couldn’t do it, therapists couldn’t listen and talk him into wholeness, and apparently the priest and pastors either didn’t get involved in the process or they just flat out failed as all the others had. Mr. Dumpty’s brokenness, as our brokenness, can be healed only by God.

Slide—Humpty Dumpty #3

I want to show you a short video clip that demonstrates how, when we weak humans love, accept our fragility and realize the importance of being in relationship, something beautiful and transforming can take place. As a dad of two daughters it touches me. I hope you see the relevance of it to what we have been encountering in the past few moments through the Word of God.

Youtube clip of father-daughter dance

Parents, wouldn’t you love it if you had a relationship with your children so that when you become your weak old self the kids could only see you through eyes of love? Now that is strength in weakness.

Here is a suggestion. Try standing before God and be very honest with yourself about your weaknesses and failures. If you can't think of any, ask your friends or spouse because, if they truly love you, they will let you know what they have known for a long time. Praise God for your gifts and talents, but don't be so focused on them that you fail to identify the weaknesses in you that God can also use. Then pray for God to help you see the ways in which He can use you to connect with others in the face of your weakness. You will be amazed at how He will create situations for you to do just that.

I know we are running late, but I want to end this sermon by having you watch a short clip about a boy named Jerome whom I met in Hartford at a magnet school. Jerome has a talent that I don't fully understand, probably because I am old. Please watch this and enjoy how God has changed him.

Video—Jerome rapping.