

Judges 7:1-8  
The Call to Small  
WRCoB 9.22.19 (100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary)

How would it be if your brand-new pastor  
Addressed the congregation  
In his/her first sermon this way . . .

*“You can live or you can die  
And I can help you do either  
But it’s up to YOU to decide which.”*

Elizabeth Dilley,  
The Minister of Ministers for Local Churches  
In the United Church of Christ

Stated these words were from her predecessor.

He had come into a small UCC congregation  
Ready to shut down or resuscitate the church  
Depending on their response.

The congregation took a long time to decide.

Dilley says, *they finally decided that not only did they want to live but they had a purpose for living.*

*They chose life not out of a fear of death but out of a sense of God’s continued call on them.*

It was a sense of God’s call that turned the church around  
With new purpose and direction.

It reminds me of the stories from the Bible  
Where God specifically used  
The weak to defeat the strong  
The foolish to confound the wise  
And the meek to herald in his kingdom.

The story before us is one of them.

A story of God's call on an ordinary person  
Who accomplished extraordinary things.

The story of Gideon reminds us  
No matter how insignificant we may feel  
No matter how great the odds against us . . .

If God formed, called, and sent us . . .  
Nothing will impede us!

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Up to this point in our story,  
Israel had experienced hard times.

It was their own doing.

They had turned from God to worship other gods.  
And God withdrew his protecting hand on them.

The Midianites swarmed down upon them  
As they tried to harvest their crops  
And graze their livestock.

They fled to the hills for safety.  
And cried out to the LORD for deliverance.

The LORD heard their prayers.

An angel came and spoke to Gideon  
As he threshed wheat in a winepress.

*God chooses you  
To lead Israel into battle w/the Midianites.*

Well, Gideon didn't see it that way  
And wanted nothing to do with it.

As most reluctant prophets do, he complained  
He was the youngest sibling of the weakest family  
In the smallest tribe  
In the tiniest country  
In the whole-wide world.

Who was he to do something like that?

But God didn't let up

**Judges 6:14 Go in the strength you have . . . . Am I not  
sending you?**

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And so, Gideon went out and gathered a militia  
Thirty-two thousand strong.

He moved his army close to where the Midianites  
Were camped in the valley of Jezreel.

And they prepared for battle.

Gideon came with his 32,000 men  
Against an army of Midianites as . . .

**Judges 7:12 thick as locusts. Their camels could no  
more be counted than the sand on the seashore.**

In Chapter 8:10 it is recorded  
There were 135,000 Midianites soldiers.

Thirty-two thousand Israelites against an army of 135,000.

What terrible odds . . . .  
But wait, God's not done.

*Too many men, Gideon.*

*With this many men  
You'd boast you beat the Midianites by your own strength.*

Grudgingly, Gideon announced to his army that  
That anyone who was scared could go home.

Twenty-two thousand left.  
Ten-thousand remain.

But God's still wasn't satisfied  
*Gideon, there's still too many.*

Gideon divided the men in two.

Those who lap their water like dogs  
And those who knelt to drink.

Those who lapped water like dogs were to stay  
Everyone could go home.

A measly three hundred men remained.

Thirty-two thousand down to 300.

## THE CALL TO SMALL.

The thinking here is, of course, with God on your side  
It really doesn't matter who else is . . . right?

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I share the story of Gideon to help us recognize  
That even with smaller numbers  
This congregation can do great things.

The smaller numbers just may be  
A part of God's plan to help us realize  
The survival of the church  
Is in God's hands not ours.

~~

The lesson today is just this . . .

God uses ordinary, weak people  
Like Gideon, like you, like me, like this congregation  
With great intention.

So we'll know without a shadow of a doubt  
That success comes from God and God alone.

It is as simple as that.

Like the three hundred remaining soldiers

We find ourselves facing seemingly insurmountable odds.

*We are forced into a situation where we must throw out old patterns and practices and learn to rely once more on the power and strength of our almighty God, over and above our delusions of grandeur or even self-sufficiency (Elizabeth Dilley).*

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The well-known church leader D. L. Moody once said:

*Give me ten [persons] who fear nothing but sin  
And love nothing but God,  
And [we] shall change the world.*

~~

The battle that follows in Judges 7  
Has to be the strangest in recorded history.

In the middle of the night  
These 300 Israelite soldiers  
Surrounded the camp of 135,000 Midianites.

Every soldier brought three things:  
A torch  
A glass jar  
And a trumpet.

On Gideon's command  
They blew their trumpets  
They smashed their jars  
And they lit their torches.

What followed was complete and absolute chaos  
As the Midianites, in their confusion  
Stumbled over and attacked one another.

When it was over  
One hundred and twenty thousand Midianites  
Had killed one another  
While the other 15,000 fled for their life.

Gideon's soldiers didn't have to lift a sword against them.

Sure, later they went and killed a bunch of them.

But this particular battle they didn't harm a soul.

And it all happened with the call to small.

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So what does this mean for our congregation?

Why would I use this specific Bible lesson  
For our 100 year anniversary?

For this reason.

As we have seen in our "Moments in History"  
Most of its entire existence the church has struggled.

And at various times, districts, ministers, and members  
Have recommended closing the congregation.

They considered West Richmond no longer viable.

But God had other plans.

And just because we are seeing smaller numbers  
Does not mean God has forsaken us.

Maybe, like Gideon's story, it is the very opposite.

God has purposely decreased our size  
So that we might become more reliant on his power.

We celebrate what God has done  
These past one hundred years.

But we celebrate even more  
What God will do in our next century.

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And so, let us "embrace our place" here in Richmond  
Trusting that God has us exactly where God wants us.

Let us live in confidence that, "God has got this."

But let us do so with clarity of vision and purpose.

I quote from Tom Sorenson, a pastor in Washington State:

*Live an identity that offers the place where God has planted you something unique, or at least unusual, something other churches in your place don't offer, something that gives people a reason to come to you even though you may be small.*

*Then, know what you can do and what you can't do. No church can do everything, small churches least of all. Don't fret over what you can't do. Identify what you can do, then do what you can do really well.*

*Being small is no excuse for mediocrity. Demand excellence from your leaders, both ordained and lay. Never accept mediocre work just because you're small or because people are volunteers. Hold everyone who works in the church, ordained and lay, to the highest ethical standards.*

~~

Carey Nieuwhof, Christian blogger

Lists 12 things a church can do to reclaim itself.

I will list six of them this morning.

## **1) Think Big**

Not big as in striving to be a megachurch

But big as in vision . . .

Too many church die of small thinking.

Small thinking goes something like this . . .

We've never done it that way!

We can't afford it!

Who's going to do it?

Why do we need to change?

## **2) Believe that with God, we can do anything**

Henry Ford once said, *whether you believe you can or whether you believe you can't . . . you're right.*

Trust that God is working in this church!

### **3) Think abundance not scarcity**

A dying church begins to get anxious . . .

And when that happens

They begin to conserve their resources.

Believe that God has provided those resources, NOW

For you to use, NOW

To proclaim God's kingdom, NOW.

### **4) Think vision before resources.**

Envision where God is pointing us

Before we begin to calculate how much it will cost.

If we start with the money

We shrink down God's vision

To our own limited vision.

### **5) Believe the work of the church is larger Than keeping our own church doors open.**

Keep the focus on the ultimate goal . . .

Helping to bring in the kingdom of God!

## 6) And lastly, break rules!

Not Biblical rules but the unspoken rules

That says we can't do it because we're too small.

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As Wayne Glick said in 1942

*The Church of the Brethren in Richmond*

*Is needed now*

*For its witness and conviction.*

*Now, of all times, we cannot fail.*

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Be confident in our church's ministry

Be certain of God's plan.

Proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus Christ!

Rest assured God wills West Richmond

To continue the work of Jesus

Peacefully, simply, together.

Trust that God and God alone

Will provide the power, strength and resource.

God's call to Gideon

Is God's call to West Richmond

***Go in the strength you have . . .***

***Am I not sending you?***