

Judges 7:1-8
Go In The Strength You Have
WRCoB 4.3.22 (White Building Commemoration)

There was once this little owlet
Sitting with his mother
On a limb on a tree at dusk.

They had just come out from their day's sleep
And the mother looked forward to the night's hunt.

The little owlet didn't feel so sure!

In fact, he struggled a bit not feeling so inclined
To hunt on a night so spooky.

He began to question himself.

He asked his mother
"Mom, am I really an owl like you?"
"I'm not something else am I?
I'm an owl, right?"

The mom answered,
"Yes, my dear, that's right, you're an owl.
Why do you ask?"

The little owlet peered into the twilight and trembled
"Because it's really starting to get dark out here!"

It helps to be reminded of who we are
When change darkens our horizons.

And change has darkened the horizon of the CoB.

It is disconcerting to see congregations struggle
Continuing to shrink in size and strength.

The pandemic has only escalated the problem.

The congregations that are surviving
Are strapped with buildings
Too old, too large, and too out of date.

It is difficult to experience this trend.

We constantly compare today's church
With the way things used to be.

It is hard to let go of the past
And face the changes pressed upon us today.

At times, due to the size of our church
We feel small and ineffective.

But let truth be told, God has always used
The weak to defeat the strong
The foolish to confound the wise
And the meek to inherit the kingdom.

The story before us is one of them.

A story of God's call on an ordinary person
And a regular bunch of people
Who accomplished extraordinary things.

The story of Gideon reminds us
 No matter how insignificant we may feel
 No matter how great the odds seem 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 was experiencing tough times.

It was of their own doing.

They had become complacent in their faith
 Which led to an overall carelessness.

As a result, the Midianites saw their opportunity and struck.

They swarmed down upon Gideon's people
 As they tried to harvest their crops
 And graze their livestock.

Resulting in their fleeing to the hills for safety.
 And crying out to the LORD for deliverance.

God heard their prayers.

God sent an angel to speak to Gideon
 As he threshed wheat in a winepress
 Seeking to hide from the feared Midianites.

“God chooses you, Gideon
 To lead Israel into battle w/the Midianites.”

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

And as most reluctant prophets do, he complained.

"Why, who am I?"

"I am the youngest sibling of the weakest family
In the smallest tribe
In the tiniest country
In the whole-wide world."

"Who am I to do something like that?"

But God wouldn't leave him alone.

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

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And so reluctantly, Gideon went and gathered a militia
Some 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.

According to chapter 8, verse 10

There were 135,000 Midianites soldiers.

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

What terrible odds

Perhaps similar odds to Ukraine's army

Against the vast huge army of Russia.

In fact, this whole story reminds me

Of our current situation in eastern Europe.

But wait a minute, God's not done.

Too many men, Gideon.

With this many men

You'd boast you beat them by your own strength.

Uh-uh. It ain't going to happen.

Grudgingly, Gideon announced to his army

That anyone who was scared could go home.

Much to Gideon's chagrin, twenty-two thousand left.

Ten-thousand remain.

But hold on, God wasn't done yet.

Still too many!

What?

And so, Gideon divided the men into two groups;
Those who lapped water like dogs
And those who kneeled to drink.

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

What remained was a measly three hundred men.

Thirty-two thousand down to 300.
300 against 135,000.
This is what God calls a fair fight!

THE CALL TO SMALL.

The thinking here of course, is, if 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 our small numbers
This congregation is doing great things.

The small numbers just may be a part of God's plan
To help us realize the survival of this church
Is in God's hands not ours.

The lesson for us is that God uses ordinary people
Like Gideon, like you, like me
Like this congregation, like our denomination
To do great things.

So that we'll know, success comes from God and God alone.

It is as simple as that.

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

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

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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 utter chaos
As the Midianites, in their confusion
Stumbled over and attacked each other.

When it was over, 120,000 Midianites
Had killed each other.
The other 15,000 had fled for their life.

Gideon's soldiers didn't lift a sword against them
A pacifist's dream come true!

All of it, the result of God's call to small.

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So what does this mean for us?

Why do I use the story of Gideon for today?

As Ann shared with us
Most of West Richmond's entire existence
Has been a struggle.

And at various times in the life of this congregation
Districts, ministers, and members
Have recommended closing the congregation.

They considered West Richmond to be unsustainable.

But God has other plans.

Perhaps, like Gideon's story
God has purposely kept us small
To rely more on God.

I stand amazed at what this small Brethren congregation
Has done over the years

Embrace our place here in Richmond.

Trust that God has us exactly where God wants us.

God has resourced this congregation
With incredible leadership.

Leadership that is willing to change as the need arises.

God has resourced this church
With the financial means to do all kinds of things
For God's glory and our neighbors' good.

And like the little owlet in the beginning illustration
Sometimes it is good to remind ourselves
Who we are when change darkens our threshold.

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Carey Nieuwhof, author and pastor
Lists 12 things a church can do
To claim their call to small.

I will list six.

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 does it need to be done?

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!

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 resources, NOW

For us to use, NOW,

To proclaim God's kingdom, NOW.

Think vision before resources.

Envision where God is pointing us

Before we begin to calculate how much it will cost.

If we start with money

We shrink down God's vision

To our own limited vision.

Start with the vision and work towards the goal

Using the resources you currently have.

Believe the work of the church is larger

Than keeping our own church doors open.

Keep the focus on the ultimate goal, kingdom building!

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.

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 resources.

God's call to Gideon

Is God's call to West Richmond

Go in the strength you have . . .

Am I not sending you?