

## Calling Matters – as Listening, Conversing, Considering, and Accepting

Judges 6:11-18, 36-40

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

November 05, 2017

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

On March 26 of 1971, CBS televised an adaptation of Paddy Chayefsky's stageplay, "Gideon," as part of the periodic Hallmark Hall of Fame broadcasts. When I looked up that date with the "on-line day-finder," I discovered it was a Friday night. That was a little bit embarrassing to me, because I distinctly remember being in the family room of my parents' house watching that broadcast; which means there was at least one Gatesville High School senior class member that night in 1971 with no social plans. For ninety minutes that evening, though, the Hallmark Hall of Fame's presentation of "Gideon" made me glad I was in front of the television. Eight years before, in 1963, I had heard Bill Cosby's hilarious expanded conversation of God speaking with Noah and Noah replying to God. I had listened to that monologue in doubled-over laughter from an audio recording on a 33 ½ RPM vinyl record. This experience of "Gideon" felt different. Seeing on television Peter Ustinov as Gideon and Jose Ferrer as the angel of the Lord visually presented those two characters with seemingly narrow options in the situational dilemmas and choices they faced. Amid the pathos and paradox in their crossing-of-paths, Gideon and the Lord's messenger clearly expressed some comic relief, but somehow it seemed more true-to-life than Cosby's audio comedic characterization of skeptical Noah.

Gideon was fashioning his life from a strategy of lying low, minding his own business, "getting by," and staying out of conflict in the community at large. Detachment and self-focus constituted his preferred agenda. The angel of the Lord (vv. 11,12) – or "the Lord" (vv. 14,16) – showing up in this screen adaptation of the stage play – calling Gideon to alter and amend his self-defined boundaries – conveyed a powerful message to a 17 year old in a 20<sup>th</sup> century central Texas living room. And it's a message still working on me 47 years later. Sometimes, if we are withdrawn, as Gideon preferred to be, God might call us beyond our self-defined boundaries, as Gideon was being called. In contrast, if we have tendencies to assert unhealthy control in other persons' lives, God could well call us to alter and amend our excessively involved style, because we are over-reaching and manipulating other folks. Either way can characterize a desiring and asserting control, whether we are controlling by "holding ourselves in" or whether controlling others' lives in our reaching out and clenching down.

Either way, God calls us as individuals to alter and amend our conduct, whether we are reclusive and miserly to the detriment of God's larger community, or whether we are coercive and manipulative in others' lives. Either way, God calls our boundaries-and-engagement-style into question by prompting us into re-defined and healthier relationships – imperfect, though, as we all are.

God calling people matters. And God's call is engaging and compelling rather than being coercive and threatening. God's call includes self and others for the well-being of the whole. Gideon was not initially convinced that God's call would serve him well, yet he listened to God, conversed with God, considered as much as he could comprehend about the call as presented, and he accepted God's call, even without completely understanding, as we never are able to do anyway, which is why we say, "At least 'skeptical trust' is involved once the negotiation is accomplished." Never completely releasing his skepticism, Gideon yet trusted God beyond what he could see with his eyes, beyond what he could compute with his mind, and beyond what he could feel comfortable with in his "gut." God calling people matters, and that calling to Gideon, to you, to me, includes whether life's comforts or challenges seem not to change very much for a span of time, or whether our comforts and challenges are unsettlingly different from hour to hour. The story of Gideon models that much to us. Whether tomorrow seems basically the same as today, or whether this afternoon is immensely different from this morning, God is calling with the expectation that we, like Gideon, listen to God, converse with God, consider from God, and accept in relation to God such as on-going, evolving call – and do so day by day.

About 15 years ago I was browsing the overstock table at a bookstore in Tulsa and picked up a book called "Me and Hank: A Boy and His Hero, 25 Years Later," by Sandy Tolan. I took it home, moved to Bryan five years later, and, after ten more years on a bookshelf in Brazos County, I began reading it last

month. It's the memoir of Sandy Tolan – of European genealogy – when he grew up in Milwaukee with great admiration of Hank Aaron – of African genealogy. Hank Aaron was then the hard-hitting outfielder for the Milwaukee Braves, who moved to Atlanta with his team in 1965, when Sandy was 9, yet whom Sandy followed closely for the next nine seasons, as Hank Aaron drew closer to the career homerun record of Babe Ruth.

Because I had not looked past the cover of the book, I thought it was only about a boy who grew to be a man, and in his forties, wrote about how he idolized a Major League Baseball player of extraordinary accomplishments. When I pulled the book off the shelf last month, I discovered how wrong I was. Yes, it was about a boy who became a man and wrote about his life-long admiration of Henry Aaron, but it is so much more: It's the story of a man in youngish middle age diving deeply in research of the hatred Henry Aaron experienced because of his racial background in contrast to the racial background of Babe Ruth, whose record Aaron passed. More than this one book, in his adult professional life, Sandy Tolan has researched, written, and produced documentaries about people struggling to live fully human lives in a world wherein de-humanizing influences and forces hold people back. Six years after the publication of "Me and Hank," he published, "The Lemon Tree: An Arab, A Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East," about two families and a home in Israel, which becomes a school-building for children who are Jews and who are Palestinian-Arabs. "The Lemon Tree" has been positively received by many readers, but Tolan has received extensive negative criticism from certain Jewish and Palestinian-Arab folk who feel threatened by a story which shows respect for "the other group." Sandy Tolan has searched for growing respect among people in a world wherein de-humanizing influences and forces hold people back. He's searched by listening, conversing, considering, and accepting the call to respect. Dalia is a female of Bulgarian-Jewish ancestry who immigrated to Israel as a child in Tolan's "The Lemon Tree," and Bashir is the male, Palestinian-Arab. At some point in the story Dalia expresses what she has grown to affirm, "Our enemy is the only partner we have." So Dalia and Bashir and others, in the land where Gideon lived 3,000 years earlier, experience themselves called beyond the boundaries others tell them surely exist and beyond which it would be to their detriment to go. But they feel called differently – to possibilities beyond what is customarily accepted.

Karen Armstrong thought she felt called to Roman Catholic religious life through the convent. After a few years, she left the convent when she felt called as an academic, a specialist in comparative religions. An additional part of her personal life, though, was dealing with the difficult-to-manage challenges of pernicious depression. The title of her 2004 memoir hints at the type of calling she experienced which spoke to her beyond her academic research and occupation. It's entitled: "The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness." One of her conclusions is what a difference compassion for other persons makes. She writes: "I have noticed that compassion is not always a popular virtue... But I have myself found that compassion is a habit of mind that is transforming" (p.297).

Gideon preferred to keep his head low, mind his own business, stay out of conflict. Sandy Tolan, Henry Aaron, Dalia and Bashir, Karen Armstrong all have heard calls in their lives to listen, converse, consider, and accept the possibility that the status quo of racial, ethnic, religious, and social boundaries need not be barriers which hold persons captive to a present defined by a past. Healthy relationships can emerge and grow, as people are called to exercise at least a skeptical trust that God seeks more of us every day, sometimes in decisions and relationships fairly familiar to us and sometimes in decisions and relationships rather different from that to which we are accustomed and with which we are comfortable.

Martin Leckebusch wrote the words we will sing in a few moments: "Give thanks for those whose faith is firm when all around seems bleak: on God's good promise they rely, so while they live and when they die how forcefully they speak: the strong, who once were weak! ... Give thanks for saints of ages past and saints alive today: though often by this world despised, their hearts by God are richly prized. Give thanks that we may say we share their pilgrim way." – All honor and praise be to God.