

## “How Many Are Enough?”

Judges 7:1-8  
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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For many reasons, this story from Judges, chapter 7, can be classified as one of the Bible’s stranger stories. It may not be the strangest of all, but it may “make” your or my top ten or 20 list in that category.

Let me say “up front” that because it is a “war” and “combat” story, it is “R” rated for violence and perhaps would be classified by some as “anti-Jesus” if Jesus’ non-violent and pacifist teachings are taken seriously. That having been said, the Gideon stories are also remembered for more reasons than telling of an unexpected and unusual victory during an insurgent uprising. It is certainly that: The few defeat the many in a win on which no one with a dime to lose would ever have gambled. ***Yet it is the story of “the few becoming the few” that catches our attention.*** If all who could have fought for the Israelites against their Midianite oppressors had fought, the story we read today would be less noteworthy and less memorable.

In the storyteller’s understanding, God seeks fewer persons for this task than anyone with common sense would anticipate. God communicates to Gideon: “Tell those who, for any reason, are reluctant to engage in this effort to go back home.” So they return home; and the number of *potential* soldiers is reduced immensely.

Then the episode about which we read today at the spring of Harod . . . God communicates to Gideon: “Each one, who kneels and cups hands to drink from his hands, dismiss also. Yet those who lie face down and lap the water in the pool like dogs or livestock, enlist those and line them up for battle.” Out of thousands, we are told, the number was 300.

Actually, that may have been a good number practically, since the Israelites inhabited the hills of the region. In the rocky spaces you cannot camp as many troops as if your army is camped on level ground. Practically, a number like 300 may have made more sense. In terms of faith and theology, the number is so few that having any success will seem so unlikely the only credit due will be to God. There is no way under heaven to predict a win when your soldiers are this greatly outnumbered. Yet from both the perspective of practicality and of faith-and-theology so God gets credit for the exceptional victory, one question presents itself: “How many are enough?”

In the Gospel according to Matthew (18:20), Jesus is quoted, saying, “Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them.” That’s a low number as a quorum for a community of Jesus’ disciples through whom God can be at work. Of course, when Jesus considered a “core group,” he chose twelve, and what an inconspicuous and unremarkable twelve, from a surface evaluation.

From a different angle, there’s what’s called “critical mass.” A certain minimum number may be necessary to underwrite an event monetarily, to make

funding realistic where the black ink which indicates sufficient capital is not washed over by red ink which indicates a dreaded financial deficit. Critical mass is also more than a funding consideration. How many are enough to build a one room hut? How many are enough to build a mansion? Or a cathedral? Or a skyscraper?

Vocal and instrumental music have ways of adapting: There are full section orchestras and choirs. There are also solos, duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and so on. Various athletic sports have ways of adapting to smaller numbers if necessary. United States' football has "11 man" rules, "8 man" rules, and "6 man" rules. Basketball games are "5 on 5" normally, but can be played "3 on 3," "2 on 2," or "1 on 1." How many are enough?

In the days before comprehensive gender inclusiveness, the United States' Marines recruited by saying they were looking not for anyone or everyone, but for "a few good men." The more updated gender-inclusive version is: "The few. The proud. The Marines." How many are enough?

You may have seen the framed quotation hanging on a wall wherever Texas A. and M. alums work or live. Attributed to General George S. Patton, it reads: "Give me an army of West Point graduates, and I'll win a battle. Give me a handful of Texas Aggies, and I'll win a war." And that from a West Point graduate himself.

How many are enough?

Related to this story from Judges, chapter 7, some have said that the more prudent soldiers cupped their hands to keep their heads up and their eyes scanning their surroundings. The hand-cuppers were conscious of the need to stay alert and minimize vulnerability in case of an ambush. These Bible students suggest that God told Gideon to choose those who fell on their stomachs to lap water because they were the most imprudent and lackadaisical. They were the slouches no leader looking for the best would select for a lean and disciplined fighting force.

How many are enough? ***The Gideon story indicates that as many or as few as God needs are enough for God to accomplish what God desires at the time.*** As many or as few as God needs. How many would that be? The number seems to vary, but more often than we think, that number can and does somehow include you and me.

Again, the Gideon story relates to far more than a combat or military mission. Gideon's reluctance and skepticism are our reluctance and skepticism when you and I sense a challenge which is more difficult than we would accept simply for personal fulfillment and/or gain. We may even wonder: Is this challenge part of a specific plan of God for me? or is it random? Some of us may think a given challenge is more part of a specific plan of God. Others may think challenges are random and general, yet personal at the same time. ***Rather than spending time and energy wondering if a challenge is specific and personal or random and general, it is far more crucial to consider why we are reluctant and skeptical.***

*We fear costs, and we fear potential loss. Trusting God costs me my being able to dictate the terms of engagement in life. I'll take the quantity of overwhelming numbers in my favor; or I'll take the superior quality of a disciplined group. God may take both fewer numbers and less disciplined participants!*

*And count on this: God wants to take you and me and others at our most reluctant, distracted, and unsuspecting points in life.*

You may tell someone this week that your pastor called you a “water lapping dog” on Sunday. If I did, I intend to put myself in that same category. Yet there’s another way to think of this. Englishman Christopher Fry wrote a play first produced in 1951, entitled, “A Sleep of Prisoners,” in which reference is made to the thawing of frozen rivers in the spring. A character speaks of “the thunder of the floes.” That’s what happens when nature’s winter slab of ice atop a river is pressured (1) by water below and (2) by warming air above to crack, shift, and break in pieces as long and wide as the foundation of a house. It sounds like thunder and artillery.

When God is challenging Gideon or anyone else to trust and participate, a rumbling can be heard within, because a thaw of resistance, reluctance, and skepticism is taking place. We sense that the Lord of heaven and earth is engaged: for liberation and grace; mercy and forgiveness; preservation and re-creation; love and care. For efforts like that, day by day this Lord may well not be interested in calling the team you or I would choose, in quantity or quality; but the ones God recruits today, tomorrow, next week will be enough for God to begin accomplishing in that day what God desires. And such efforts will include you and me, in one way or another.

Pay attention to the thaw that you may feel, and to the thunder of the floes you are hearing when trust rises and resistance breaks as it may not quite have done yesterday. Gideon sensed that. And so do we.

God alone gets the credit for that.

– All honor and praise be to God.