

Sermon delivered by Lee Barstow July 22, 2007
South Congregational Church, Amherst, Massachusetts

Judges 6:11-15, 25-27

The book of Judges is full of chaos and conflict, as the Israelites struggle externally against domination by their enemies and, internally, against disobedience to God which, the stories tell us, is the root cause of their suffering. In our story today, The Israelites have been oppressed for seven years by the Midianites, and Gideon is called on by God to deliver them.

11 Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. ¹²The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.'
¹³Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.'
¹⁴Then the Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.'
¹⁵He responded, 'But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.'

25 That night the Lord said to him, 'Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole* that is beside it; ²⁶and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order; then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt-offering with the wood of the sacred pole* that you shall cut down.'
²⁷So Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as the Lord had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the townspeople to do it by day, he did it by night.

Matthew 7:7-14

These verses are a part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

7 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? 10Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? 11If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

12 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

13 'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

responsibilities and work and my second job and church and on, and on, and on.

When I'm faced with the reality of so *many huge* destructive forces, and I don't see much power in my ability or anyone else's to turn them around, I lose hope. I get scared. I tell myself I'm beside the point, and I get on with my daily life.

Well, I'm here to tell you that my day at General Synod helped. A lot. There I sat with thousands of others who feel just the same *way*. And I realized that beyond that Civic Center auditorium there are millions more of us who want to make a difference... but we get stuck in what feels like a lack of power.

What all of at Synod heard -- again and again -- was the message that comes from the ultimate *core* of our tradition—that God is ready to help us when we're ready to ask for it and we're ready to act on it.

This faith that help is available is the bedrock of our tradition, and for that matter, of every other religious tradition, too. It is *known* to be true. It is our *experience*. This is the true meaning of the word faith after all—not blind belief in something—but the *memory* of what we have already *experienced*.

And it is precisely this faith which gives us and our sister congregations such a great advantage. We are part of a tradition that tells us through six thousand years of stories that the darkness can *not* overwhelm the light. The very *being* of our faith tells us that miracles happen when faithful people attempt what looks ridiculous on the face of it. Our entire *existence* is based on the truth that with God, nothing is impossible. In story after story after story, both testaments of our scripture tell of people who faced what appeared to be sure failure, but who found that they were mistaken, because with God, nothing is impossible.

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And yet, so many of us – me included – continue to believe that today's problems are beyond our reach. We're too little to make a difference. What's the use in trying... it won't change anything anyway. This is why I chose our story today about Gideon, because that's just what he thought, too, before he accepted God's commission and changed the world.

And there was something else that hooked me on the Gideon story, which was that his first commission from God was to destroy the bull, an idol that was being worshipped by the Israelites, and to instead build a simple altar to God.

I read the story when I was wrestling with the contradiction that had been consuming me since Hartford: the desperate need to take social action on one hand, and the difficulty of doing so on the other. It just doesn't make sense. I

I love this story partly because Gideon has a hard time rising to the challenge. First he doesn't believe that the angel really speaks for God. So he asks for proof. Good. Our faith should never be based on blind belief—that's just another kind of idol. Our faith needs to be based on experience. And even though Gideon trusts God enough to accept the commission to destroy the bull, he's scared of what everyone will think, and so he does it at night to conceal his identity. And after that success, when God tells him to go defeat the Midianites, in the verses after our reading today, Gideon asks for *another* sign. He is not taking any chances. And that's okay. The story helps us realize that that Gideon -- that we -- don't need to be heroes like Rambo. All that's needed is to seek the truth and follow it instead of negative self-talk and his fear.

How rich our tradition is with stories like this! It seems like the heroes of the Bible are always finding God's truth in the midst of screaming idol-voices that they're being ridiculous, or stupid, or tragically naive. Have you ever heard those voices? I know I have, and I'm comforted to realize we're in good company.

Think of Noah being asked to build an ark in the desert. Or Moses against the power of Pharaoh. David against Goliath. Ruth, who listened to the still small voice of truth instead of the idol of cultural prejudice and said to Naomi, "Your people are my people." And of course Jesus, who's ministry was all about blowing the cover of the idols of false belief. A belief that kept people from welcoming the "unclean" from the table? An idol. A law that prevented healing on the Sabbath? An idol. Consistently, Jesus told people not to accept the social norms of the day, and instead seek the truth of God.

How? "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

The struggles of Jesus and the others continue still, in our world and in every one of our hearts. And yet we have come so far since then, thanks to the teachings of Jesus and the faith and courage of our forebears. Many many millions of us today know beyond the shadow of a doubt that all people are created equal, and that a system must be corrupt when it includes as much suffering as our does today. We *can hear* the still, small voice of God telling us that we're living in a modern empire of false beliefs, including the one that says all the suffering is just how things are.

And we who are blessed to be a part of the great democratic movement of our church also know that we have a responsibility to live our truth. It is our job to find the idols of our time and pull them down. God is calling us to fight injustice and relieve suffering. And God is waiting to help us.

May it be so for each and every one of us. Amen.