

People Like Us

New Math: Gideon

Judges 6:36-40, 7:2-7

July 10, 2022

What does God ask of us?

Well, if you ask that question to any of the children who attended Second's annual Vacation Bible School, you would get a clear, concise, Biblical answer. A couple of weeks ago, nearly two hundred children filled this campus with joyful energy, experiencing God's love and growing in faith together. The theme verse for VBS this year came from the prophet Micah: What does the Lord require of you? What does God ask of us? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Micah says that this is what God asks of us. Justice. Kindness. A humble walk with God. And I can assure you, having attended each of the morning programs, that by the end of the week of Vacation Bible School, these 200 kids were shouting, singing, praying, and dancing these words. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

It's worth noting, I think, what is *not* included in this summary of God's requirements in the prophets. You will note that having all the right answers does not make the list. Did you notice that? Self-righteous displays of personal piety? Nowhere on it. Absolute unanimity among all of God's people on every issue? Not there. Instead, in the tradition of the prophets, the tradition picked up by Jesus himself, Micah emphasizes *lived* faith—that is, actions, not just feelings or thoughts.

God asks us to *do* justly, to *love* kindly, to *walk* humbly. This is what God asks of us. And yet, I've reflected on these divine requirements, and it occurred to me that there is a prerequisite for the embodied practice that the prophets describe. There is something that comes before our faithful,

active response to God's command. It is trust.

Trust. After all, before we can put faith into action, we must have faith. Trust is the foundation of any relationship, human or divine.

Gideon. He's a person like us. He wants to live faithfully. He struggles to trust God. He has gifts to share. He is filled with fear. He is reluctant from the very beginning of the story. And God chooses Gideon as God's own agent of liberation for God's people.

The section you've heard this morning is one brief part of a larger narrative, but that narrative repeats the theme over and over again. Gideon is a hesitant, at times even a resistant, leader. He needs signs. He needs assurance. He tests God. And at the heart of his resistance—at the heart of his need for assurance—is the existential struggle with faith itself. Can God be trusted?

If you know Gideon's context, you'll understand the question. The chapter begins with ominous words that are also familiar to readers of the Hebrew Bible. Those words are these: "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The specific evil was the worship of idols, of false gods. And so commences another cycle of judgment and oppression. This time it is the Midianites. They are given victory over the Israelites, and in a state of desperation, the people cry out to God.

They are suffering. They are on the verge of despair, and they lift their voices to God. And God chooses *Gideon*? Let's just say there were better options available. It's a complicated relationship from the very beginning. An angel of the Lord miraculously appears while Gideon is hiding food from the

Midianite oppressors. The angel says, “God is with you.” Most of the time, when angels appear in scripture, their words are taken as true, believed, followed. “God is with you.” But Gideon does not answer in that way. He answers honestly and heartbreakingly, “I’m not so sure about that. Have you seen what is happening to us?” Gideon responds to the angel, “I know the old stories of God’s power and liberation. I know the stories of our ancestors who were delivered from captivity in Egypt. But where is this God now?” I honestly love this exchange. I love the directness of Gideon’s response. And I love God’s answer. Full steam ahead. “I choose you. I will be with you. Just trust me.”

Can God be trusted? If you look around, you’ll understand the question. The voice of faith and hope drowned out by fear and division. The shaking of foundations once considered unshakable. The loss of trust in institutions and regard for one another. The very real and unavoidable suffering of God’s people nearby and around the globe. An increasingly dangerous lack of common vision and selfless service. Even as we gather in worship this day, we can say with Gideon, “Have you seen what is happening? Where is God? Where is God now?”

Gideon demands a sign before he will act on God’s command. Gideon wants to know that God is for real. Have you been there? Have you found yourself in Gideon’s shoes? Not long ago, a dear friend of mine shared the story of her family’s journey through her daughter’s diagnosis with bipolar disorder. It was an incredibly painful and fearful time for the whole family. Her daughter was hospitalized for months as doctors tried to find the right combination of medication and treatment. My friend is a person of extraordinary faith in God, and as she told the story, she remembered late one night being on her knees, Bible in hand, crying out to God, “*I did not write this. You made promises. I’m going to hold you to them.*” Where is God now? Our most honest and perhaps our most faithful prayers come in moments of deepest desperation, come in

moments when there is nowhere left to turn. Gideon wants to hear from God.

God’s response to Gideon is both fascinating and unexpected. After meeting the demands for simple signs of divine presence, God makes a demand of *Gideon*. “Reduce the size of your force. Cut it in half. Then do it again. And again. And again.” Gideon’s army goes from 32,000 to 300.

There’s a message here. “I choose you. I will be with you. You’re going to have to trust me.”

You probably know what happens next. This tiny remnant of Israelites under Gideon’s command defeat the Midianites and are delivered from oppression. Finally free, the Israelites return to their worship of God, and they ask Gideon to be their king. His response? “I will not rule over you, my son will not rule over you...the Lord will rule over you.” And so, the writer of Judges records, “the land had rest for forty years in the days of Gideon.”

What does God ask of us? Justice, kindness, humility.

Practices of courageous faith and compassionate grace. Yes. Yes. Yes. But first, God asks us to trust.

I spent the first two weeks of June in Montreat, North Carolina, where I had the opportunity to preach for the Montreat Youth Conferences—an event and a place that transformed my life 26 summers ago. Each year’s conferences are organized around a theme drawn from scripture. This year’s theme at Montreat is *More Than Enough*. We spent the weeks considering the possibility that, by God’s grace, there is more than enough and that, by God’s grace, we—together—*are* more than enough.

On Monday evening, we read the story of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands from five loaves and two fish. You might remember how it happens. The crowd, gathered to hear Jesus preach, gets hungry as the hour grows late. The disciples, prudent, practical, tell Jesus to send the crowd away for food. Jesus responds, “You give them something to eat.” Now I imagine that feeding five thousand with five loaves

and two fish is at least as ludicrous as defeating the Midianite army with three hundred soldiers. And the message is exactly the same.

God's ways are not our ways. God's math is not our math.

To the disciples, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat. There will be enough. *Trust me.*"

To Gideon, God says, "I will be with you. That's more than enough. *Trust me.*"

Could it be that trusting God changes the calculus? We read about it over and over again in the pages of scripture, how God chooses these ordinary, weak, the least expected of all. Paul writes it this way to the Corinthians: God chose the low and the despised in the world. Again, Paul writes, "...we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us."

The truth is that on our own, we will never be enough. So, thanks be to God that we are *never* on our own.

Now, I know it can be tempting to think otherwise. Gideon doubted. He was filled with fear. So are we. So do we. Gideon was on the brink of despair. He was about to give up, and maybe you've been there, too. Maybe that's where you are right now. Perhaps overwhelmed or exhausted, tired of carrying a weight too heavy to bear. Perhaps you are here this morning wondering, "Where is God?" If so, I want to offer you a word of Biblical hope. Scripture teaches that when we find ourselves least able to carry the weight of the world, God shows up. Scripture teaches that when we are our weakest, our most exasperated, God is most present. Scripture teaches that when every other avenue leads to a dead end, it is God who points the way home.

And then, it is God who does the impossible. Thousands of hungry bodies fed on a meager offering of loaves and fish. A great army defeated by a few hundred worn and weary soldiers. A resurgence of energy. A fresh dose of hope. Somehow, improbably, a return of faith, of trust, of courage to speak and

act differently. The numbers don't add up, but God doesn't seem to care about that.

I do. A confession: My name is Chris, and I am a compulsive counter. I believe in metrics, in goals, in growth. I want the church, our church, this church to expand its reach, to broaden its membership. I want more people to be a part of what we're doing here at Second, in the community beyond our doors and in this space. I want to fill this sanctuary with worshipers every single Sunday morning. And another confession: I worry when we don't. I worry that we won't. I worry about you. I worry about the budget. I worry about every minor snag that could be a sign of decline. I struggle to trust. I lose sleep over this stuff. I'm not kidding.

So, here's a lesson I need from this story about a person like you and me named Gideon. By God's grace and through God's power, there is enough. When we place our trust in God, extraordinary things can happen. God will use the efforts we make and the actions we take in ways we could never imagine. Who knows what is possible when we trust God? We can dream and pray and hope bigger than we would otherwise because God is with us.

Early tomorrow morning, I'll begin a week of study and planning. It's one of my favorite weeks of the entire year—all by myself, time to pray, reconnect with God, and discern God's will for me and for us together. I would be grateful for your prayers during this time away. This morning, I'll give you a sneak preview of two audacious and faithful questions still taking shape in my heart and spirit. You can pray with me.

What if Second Church could be a place where all are truly welcome? Not just in theory and slogan, but in practice and action. Could we model together the kind of brave space that is so desperately needed right now? Could we draw together people from across every perspective and all over the spectrum and divide and ask God to show us how to be family to one another? To ask God what we might learn from one another?

What if those in Washington Township who are at greatest risk and in most urgent need knew that this church exists for them? Could we be bolder in our outreach and more relational in our approach? Could we somehow be part of breaking cycles of generational poverty and lifting our neighbors to sustainability and wholeness?

I don't know, but when we trust God, extraordinary things can happen. More than we could ask or imagine, scripture says. Perhaps this is the time for us to trust God, to bring whatever we have to offer, as meager as it may seem.

For many years now, I've held on to a poem given to me by my mentor at a time when I was struggling to see a hopeful future and my place in it. The poet is a writer named Bonaro Overstreet, and the poem is inscribed, "To the one who doubts the worth of doing anything if you can't do everything."

You say the little efforts that I make
will do no good: they will never prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where Justice hangs in the balance.
I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.ⁱ

What does God ask of us? Justice. Kindness.
Humility. A few ounces on the scale. Five loaves, two
fish. A worn and weary band of disciples. Hardly
anything at all.

Except. When we trust God, it will be enough.
Enough. Always enough. More than enough. Amen.

ⁱ Overstreet, Bonaro W. "Stubborn Ounces." *Hands Laid Upon the Wind*. New York: Norton, 1955.