

Crooked Timber: Integrity and Accountability in Partnerships Matter

Judges 7:1-8 and James 2:22-26

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

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First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

Yesterday, November 11, was Veterans' Day, a day set aside to honor all who've served this nation through military service in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard. Before the mid-1970s, one could join the armed forces as a volunteer, but there was also a "draft system" which brought age-qualified and physically capable young men into the service of their country. About 1970, the U.S. switched to a number-lottery system for populating the armed forces. While a national database of 18 year and older young adults today is still maintained through mandatory registrations, the nation has switched to an all-volunteer military personnel set-up. There are also non-military forms of national service, such as the Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps – and its branch called the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC). It can be long-term positive and potentially life-changing to serve one's country. Then again, serving in the military or in a non-military form of national service is not a pure avenue of service, anymore than serving in religious and/or corporate institutions is "pure" or perfect.

The story we read today from Judges, chapter 7, is a curious story about God instructing Gideon how to populate a militia against the Midianites, who ruled the area where Gideon's tribe and the cousin tribes lived. Last Sunday we read from chapter 6, where Gideon's requests for God to confirm God's personal call to Gideon seemed strange. Today we read from chapter 7, where God's instructions to Gideon seem strange. Gideon puts out the call for his fellow-tribal members and their cousins to gather in preparation for their rebellion against the Midianites. God instructs Gideon to tell all of those assembled, "If this challenge frightens you, go ahead and return home. It's o.k. God will find a way." Many take that option. Then God instructs Gideon to tell the still sizeable group remaining to gather at the river to quench their thirst. Once there, God instructs Gideon to notice which ones at the river kneel on one knee or two and cup the water with their hands, saying essentially: "Everyone who cups the water can return home. But keep those for the actual combat group who are at the river on their stomachs lapping their drink directly from the water."

I've heard this interpreted at least two ways across the years. (1) Some say that the ones who kneel and cup their hands to drink are the more "refined" in their tastes and habits and those who fall on their stomachs and lap their drink directly from the river are crude and socially unrefined. God chooses the crude and socially unrefined for this mission. (2) Some others say that those who kneel and cup are the militarily more cautious and wise. They drink with their heads and eyes up. They will wisely notice all the movement around them. Those who fall on their stomachs and lap their drink directly from the river indicate the reckless and compulsive nature of their personalities, lacking caution. They're willing to put their heads down without regard in the moment for a potential ambush while vulnerable. I don't know whether God's instructions are designed to identify and select the more backwoods and less socially refined, or whether to identify and select the reckless and compulsive of the larger group. Either way, Gideon ends up with 300, and the larger number of the potential military force returns home. While Gideon is undoubtedly perplexed that God has chosen to reduce the actual militia employed to a fraction of the number of those who originally turned out, Gideon understands that the number of fall-on-the-stomach-water-lappers is the number God is willing to go forward with.

What if God told Church Treasurer Rick Page and Finance Committee Chair Jay McKay to return-to-senders all the estimate-of-giving envelopes from households where a sponge was employed to wet the glue on the envelope before sealing it. What if God said to Rick and Jay, "Tell the Session Elders that of whatever number of estimated giving cards for 2018 which are returned to the church, God wants us to accept money in 2018 only from those who licked their envelopes to activate the glue before sealing it"? The Session Elders would be mortified, and they would wonder what possessed Rick and Jay to think with such bizarre distinctions. Why do anything to diminish potential numbers when larger numbers can be helpful, larger numbers with a military force, larger numbers with membership, larger numbers of dollars for a budget? Yet the numbers of the people themselves (or the numbers of dollars)

may not be the point of this ancient story related to Gideon, in terms of being the issue of greatest importance for God, and maybe should not be the issue of greatest importance for us as God's people. Yes, quantity matters, undeniably. But remember what God told Gideon (at verse 2), as this process of meeting the challenge began? "I'm concerned that the people will think they have earned and made possible the victory which I will give them / that they will think they deserve credit for the great response in numbers which they have been able to produce."

What difference might it make if we can hear from this story something of the point that God has had in mind, beginning a long time ago? What difference might it make if we understood day-by-day that integrity and authenticity in life depend – not on quantity or quality as we produce quantity or quality, but – on our being shaped and living forward as God gives character and meaning and purpose in life through us? and on our being accountable to life as God shares life with us and asks us to be accountable covenant-partners together? What difference might that make?

In 2015, social commentator and columnist David Brooks published his book, "The Road to Character." A primary image for Brooks, himself of the Jewish faith tradition, is 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's reference to "crooked timber." Immanuel Kant wrote, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." From this quote, David Brooks explains, "People in this 'crooked-timber' school of humanity have an acute awareness of their own flaws and believe that character is built in the struggle against their own weaknesses . . . You can see evidence of the inner struggle in these individuals' considerations. They are pleased on days when they win some small victory over selfishness and hard-heartedness. They are despondent on days when they let themselves down, when they avoid some charitable task because they were lazy or tired, or fail to attend to a person who wanted to be heard. They understand their life largely as a moral adventure" (p.11).

Brooks concludes his book with what he calls a "Humility Code," consistent with Kant's "crooked timber of humanity" image. The fifteen points of his "humility code" include: "We don't live for happiness; we live for holiness. Life is essentially a moral drama, not a pleasure (hedonistic) drama . . . The long road to character begins with each of us accurately understanding that we are flawed characters, with innate tendencies toward selfishness and (self-defensive) overconfidence . . . Although flawed, we are fearfully and wonderfully made . . . In the struggle against our own weakness, humility is the key, having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your place in the cosmos . . . Because of pride, we try to prove we are better than those around us . . . It doesn't matter if you work at hedge fund company or as a server of the poor at a charity outreach, there are heroes and schmucks in both worlds . . . Through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment, you grow to behave with self-discipline, constancy, and dependability . . . If you are to prosper in the confrontation with yourself, you have to put yourself in a position to experience redemptive assistance from outside yourself – from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, and exemplars . . . We are all ultimately saved by grace . . . Defeating weakness often means quieting the self, muting the sound of your own ego, leaning on self-modesty and a capacity for reverence and awe at what is beyond the self . . . Because the world is as complex as it is, wisdom is learning how to be and behave when perfect knowledge is unavailable . . . Finding vocation does not mean looking "within" for passion, but searching beyond the inner self for what life asks of us . . . Authentic leadership and participation means being stewards of institutions and passing them along in better condition than when one arrived . . . (And finally) Maturity is not based on being better than other people at something, but by being better than you used to be, navigating toward values which are constant" (pgs.262-267).

The story of Gideon and of human history, the story of this 150 year old congregation and of your years of life and mine remind us of nothing if not of how God takes only crooked timber to fashion communities of flawed people for living toward a wholeness from grace which uplifts all people, and for which we can never take credit ourselves. It's never easy, partly because it's more than numbers, and it's always more than we can do on our own. Always. Beyond our own egos and desires, however, crooked timbers that we are, let us daily grow in gladness and in gratitude toward God's purposes and callings beyond ourselves for "the greater good" throughout God's world. – All honor and praise be to God.