



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

**“WHAT GIDEON REVEALS”
2. About Certainty & Faith**

Scripture Lessons: Judges 6:33-40; Luke 16:19-31

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, September 6, 2009.

After a two week break we are returning to the book of Judges and to some of the escapades of Gideon, who happens to be one of my favorite biblical characters and who, of all the Judges found in the book by that name, is the one with whom we can most readily identify. Here is a man called of God to undertake a challenging mission but also one who knows the struggles and the reservations entailed in such an undertaking. And I suppose that most of us, if we are honest, can see ourselves reflected in this man’s dilemma, in both his fears and his doubts.

In our first message we saw that Gideon’s story reveals something about how we understand ourselves and our calling, or our self-image and our service as I called it. Called to lead Israel out from under the oppression of the invading Midianites, Gideon had a difficult time believing that the Lord had chosen the right person for the task. He saw in himself only what he had been in the past, yet God must have seen in him something far different. God saw what Gideon potentially was and what he was capable of becoming and doing if he would but trust in and rely upon the Lord.

Still unconvinced of God’s wisdom and of God’s choice and of his own prowess for the mission, Gideon in our story for today decides to put the Lord to the test, to see if it were really true that God was calling him to such a bold undertaking. Hesitantly he asks the Lord to confirm his call through what is known as the fleece test. Gideon explains that he would lay a piece of wool on the ground and if, in the morning, the fleece was wet with dew while the surrounding ground was dry, then he would know that the Lord was serious in wanting to deliver Israel through his hand. Strangely enough, the next morning Gideon wrung a bowl of water from the soaked fleece that was lying on dry ground.

Now you would have thought, would you not, that that little demonstration would have been sufficient to convince any skeptic, but not so with Gideon! Once again, risking the anger and patience of the Lord, Gideon asks for an additional sign. Either Gideon is still disbelieving or else he is hoping beyond hope for a way out of this dangerous mission. And so he asks the Lord in this new trial to make the fleece dry and the ground wet on the following morning. Sure enough it was as he requested.

This is a fascinating story. The great 17th century French theologian and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, was captivated by this story. In a notebook he kept but never lived to complete, he was continually referring in marginal notes to “Gideon’s fleece” and we can only wonder what comments he longed to make upon it. It is certainly a story full of surprises. It is surprising first of all that Gideon dared to test the Lord the first time and even more surprising that he had the unmitigated gull to attempt the same thing a second time. But to me, far more surprising still than Gideon’s brazen impudence, is the Lord’s uncharacteristic willingness to submit to this human test and to provide Gideon with the requested confirmation.

This morning I would like to use this story as a backdrop against which we can discuss this whole matter of how can one be certain. How can one be sure of God's guidance, of God's existence, of God's will for one's life? How can one be certain of the truth of God's word?

Have you never once longed to do what Gideon did? Have you never wanted to put God to the test in some way, to have some means whereby you could prove the truth of some religious assertion or demonstrate that some inward conviction or hope was ultimately true. I certainly have. Many people through the ages have thought that if only God would provide some miraculous sign, some incontrovertible evidence, then they would believe and possess an unshakeable faith. They would then without reservation live in faith and obedience.

But is this really possible? What can we know for certain? Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and attempts to answer the basic question as to what distinguishes true knowledge from false knowledge. More specifically Gideon's concern and ours has to do with what is known as Theological Verification. Is it possible to verify or demonstrably prove some theological assertion, such as God is calling me to serve him, or God is love, or God forgives me, or it is better to give than to receive, or honesty is the best policy? You see, it is my personal conviction and also my understanding of scripture that what we believe in many areas, but especially religious areas, has more to do with our inner faith (which is always a gift) than it does with the external evidence.

This is an ancient debate in theological circles. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that one understands and therefore believes, that it is one's reasoning capacity and his intelligent grasp of all the evidence that leads to faith. St. Augustine, on the other hand, argued that one believes and then is able to understand. Presbyterians on the whole have followed the Augustinian tradition and I am convinced that this has the greater support of scripture.

Most people, by nature, believe what they chose to believe and what they want to believe and not necessarily what the evidence indicates. Evidence after all, especially in the religious sphere, is subject to so many different interpretations. We read into the evidence consciously or unconsciously what we want to believe or choose to believe.

In the parable of our Lord read this morning about the rich man and Lazarus, the repentant rich man asked Father Abraham if he could go back and warn his brother's about how they were living so that they might avoid his miserable fate. Lazarus suggests that they will believe if someone comes back from the dead. And Jesus has Abraham say: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:31)

Jesus may well have been making a reference to his own resurrection here and indicating that the resurrection would prove nothing to those who did not wish to believe it, to those who were not open to its possibilities. After all, the evidence of the resurrection was subject to different interpretations as the New Testament itself reminds us. Some would say, "Well, Jesus wasn't really dead, but only sleeping or feigning death." Others would say it was a hoax that the disciples had come and stolen the body and later testified that they had seen him alive, and so forth. Even some of those who saw him following his resurrection believed that their eyes were deceiving them. So what we see and what we hear is not necessarily convincing because we interpret the evidence in light of what we have already decided to believe.

Frequently in our Lord's ministry, the Pharisees and Sadducees would come to Jesus and ask him to perform a miracle as some sort of divine confirmation that he was the Messiah. But he consistently refused to prove anything. Why? Because faith does not come through proof. And then

later when he would do some miraculous thing, his accusers would even attribute his power to Satan and not to God, so how could he prove or demonstrate anything to those unwilling to believe?

Evidence of God and of God's will is available only to those who believe and not to those who choose to disbelieve. Evidence does not necessarily lead to faith but rather faith enables us to grasp and appropriate the evidence. And so it is that we believe in order to understand.

Let me illustrate with a rather crude analogy. Is there any way that a man can prove to a woman with absolute certainty that he loves her? What kind of evidence would be overwhelming, convincing, unquestionable proof? Well, does it not all depend on what the woman chooses to believe? If inwardly she believes she is loved then she will excuse his unloving behavior as a brief aberration. On the other hand, if she doesn't really believe that she is loved, then even the man's most loving gestures will be regarded as manipulative, or as evidence that he has ulterior motives. So you see, the woman must make a choice as to whether she believes herself to be loved or doesn't because she will interpret the evidence or the lack of evidence as confirmation of what she has already decided. This is not gender exclusive because it works the other way around as well.

This may not be a very helpful analogy but what I am trying to say is that in our walk with God we simply have to make a choice. We either take the risk of faith or we do not. Either we believe God and take God at his word and begin to act on the basis of this belief or we do not. But in either case we believe what we have chosen to believe.

Basil Mitchell, the Oxford philosopher, composed a parable entitled *The Stranger* which makes the same case.

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a Stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at the meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and consistency and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side'.

Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side'. He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'The Stranger knows best'. Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain: 'Well, if that's what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better.'

The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition 'The Stranger is on our side'. This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognizes that the Stranger's

ambiguous behavior does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.

Let me ask you, did the fleece test really prove anything to Gideon? Personally, I do not think that it did. When was it that he came to believe that God would deliver Israel through his hand? God's angel had already miraculously consumed the meat and the cakes with fire as we read two weeks ago, and yet Gideon had his doubts. And when the fleece was literally wringing wet on that first morning, Gideon remained unconvinced. And even when the fleece was dry and the ground was wet, we are still not told that Gideon's reservations were removed. True, he got up and did what the Lord told him to do but it may have been only because he had insufficient courage to ask for yet another proof, or perhaps he realized that he was not going to get out of this particular assignment. Gideon is not yet finished with his moments of hesitancy and doubt, but it seems to me that the miracle of the fleece did not confirm Gideon's call and commission nearly so much as did his own faithful obedience. That is to say, it was only as he took the Lord at his word that he discovered that the Lord could be trusted and that God's word was true and reliable. For us, my friends, it will be no different.

Like Gideon, you and I are sometimes tempted to believe that if the Lord would only come down with a miracle or two we would then take him at his word. We would have faith and we would begin to live as he has told us to live. But we are only deceiving ourselves. Faith is not the result of the evidence. Rather, faith is the prerequisite for seeing any evidence. The Bible tells us that as Christians we "walk by faith and not by sight". (II Cor. 5:7) We were reminded as we were called to worship this morning "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". (Heb. 11:1)

In closing let me say that this whole business of believing prior to having convincing evidence must seem like foolishness to most people. It certainly goes against the grain of our culture. And frankly, we must admit that it is foolishness to some degree. It is what we would call the folly of the Gospel. And it thus makes it incumbent upon all of us to venture out, to choose to be people of faith and obedience, to dare to believe that God loves us and forgives us and is expecting us as weak and mortal people to serve his purposes and to be his witnesses. Only if you choose to believe will you discover your faith confirmed as you live out your life of discipleship. And if you are waiting for convincing proof before you ever engage in the risk of discipleship, you will wait forever.

Let me close now with the words of Paul in I Corinthians which could almost serve as a summary of today's message:

For God in his wisdom made it impossible for people to know him by means of their own wisdom. Instead by means of the so-called "foolish" message we preach, God decided to save those who believe. Jews want miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; but for those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (I Cor. 1:21-25)