



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHAT GIDEON REVEALS” 4. About Unintended Idolatry

Scripture Lessons: Judges 8:22-35; Luke 11:24-26

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, September 27, 2009.

This morning we draw to a close our study of that fascinating Old Testament character by the name of Gideon. We began by considering Gideon’s call to be a judge and his response to that call. Gideon discovered that God’s view of him and his potential differed radically from Gideon’s assessment of his own abilities. Thinking that he was the last person that should have been addressed as a “mighty warrior,” he became precisely that in the providence of God.

Next we looked at the infamous “fleece test” and I suggested that contrary to what most of us like to think, faith is not the result of proof or of comprehension, but rather faith is a prerequisite for comprehension.

Next our sermon on Gideon’s army and his odds revealed how God can accomplish seemingly impossible things through people who are wholly committed to the work that he has given them. And now, if you will indulge me for one more week, I would like to simply attempt a final assessment of the life and work of this judge of Israel by the name of Gideon. I love stories with happy endings. Unfortunately, Gideon’s does not happen to be one of them.

In many ways this last story is the strangest of them all and not because of anything miraculous or unbelievable that occurs, but simply because of the unexpected and even uncharacteristic behavior of Gideon himself. Frederick Buechner has written that “the best thing the judge Gideon ever did and the worst mistake he ever made came within moments of each other.” Actually, Gideon’s best and worst can be seen in verses 23 & 24 if you wish to consult your Bible.

The best thing, or at least the most noble thing, that Gideon ever did was when he rejected the invitation of the Israelites who wanted to make him their king after he led them to victory over the Midianite invaders. I want you to notice the reason that Gideon gives for declining the offer of the throne. It is not because of any great modesty on his part or because he felt a sense of inadequacy, as previously was the case. Rather, Gideon spurned the offer to become king because he recognized, as did Samuel who had come after him, that the only true King of Israel was Yahweh their God. And Gideon proceeded to tell the people this in no uncertain terms. Now if Gideon had any personal yearnings for power or prestige, he certainly managed to squelch them. He had no delusions about his own importance and never doubted that it was God who had delivered Israel from the hand of the Midianites and not himself. This was not only a noble gesture on Gideon’s behalf, but considering the trouble that would come to Israel after she finally secured a king, that this decision showed great wisdom and foresight.

And then, right on the heels of this noble and farsighted action comes Gideon most regrettable and perhaps most shortsighted decision. Apparently it was fashionable that season in the desert for all the men from the east to wear gold earrings many of which had been captured as part of the bounty of the defeated Midianites. When Gideon requested that his people contribute their gold earrings to him

they were more than glad to do so. A cloak was spread upon the ground and the people began making their contributions. Not only the gold earrings, but crescents and pendants and golden collars taken from prized camels captured in battle were contributed. And before it was over, Gideon had more than forty pounds of gold for the project he had in mind.

And what was that project? In all fairness to Gideon we need to say that he probably had no malevolent or selfish purpose in mind for his project. Instead, he wanted to use the gold gathered to fashion one incredibly beautiful and valuable ephod. Now let's be honest here, --- you wouldn't know an ephod if you saw one, would you? There is no need to be embarrassed. Neither would I! As a matter of fact, Bible scholars are not wholly certain just what an ephod was. We are sure that it was something used in worship, probably something worn by the priest, but whether it was an image, a pouch, a vestment, or whatever we are not quite certain. Nonetheless, Gideon must have thought that it was the kind of religious object that would remind the Israelites precisely of who their king was. But of course, things did not turn out quite the way that Gideon had hoped as the story unfolds.

Now Gideon may have ended up being a splendid soldier. He may have become, as promised, a "mighty warrior", but in the end he proved to be a very short-sighted priest, a man who lost sight of the deepest needs of his people Israel and of the real purpose behind the mission given to him by the Lord. The same man who earlier had taken an ax in hand and destroyed the Baal gods within the land now becomes, even if unwittingly, the maker of yet another idol.

Granted, Gideon did not set out to manufacture an idol. As I said, his intentions were honorable. But the sad truth is that he failed to realize that whenever people begin to fasten God to something that they have fashioned, then idolatry cannot be far behind. Apparently the ephod became an important part of the people's worship. And then it became an indispensable part of their worship. And so in time the ephod was little more than an object of their worship, so much so that the Bible says they played the harlot after it. That is to say, the people began to worship the ephod rather than the living and true God.

I will not belabor this issue of idolatry for we have addressed it in previous sermons. But let it suffice to say that though it may seem an archaic practice from ancient days, idolatry is alive and well as the beginning of the third millennium after Christ. This year we are celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, our forebear in the Presbyterian and Reformed faith. One of Calvin's greatest contributions to systematic theology was his polemic against idolatry. Calvin has helped the church through the ages to realize that idolatry occurs whenever we attach the infinite God to finite things, whenever we fasten God to things that humans have fashioned. We may not be sure what an ephod is or what it was in biblical days, but I want you to know that idols are present about us on every hand whether we recognize them or not. Money is an idol for far too many people today. It has taken the place of God. For many people it is their money or their lack of it that determines their worth. It is money that they seek to serve and to acquire more than all else.

But money is not the lone idol about us. We can make of the church an idol. We can make our denomination, our theological convictions, our creeds, our work, our profession, our beautiful church facilities into nothing less than an idol because these things matter more than the living God. Even good things like the love of country or the devotion to one's family, or the gift of sexuality can become, not a gift from God, but an idol that actually challenges our allegiance to God. Whenever we restrict the living God to some person, place, or thing; whenever we so identify God with something that our relationship to God is dependent upon it, then we are nothing more than modern day idolaters, so we can ill afford to glibly moralize about these shameless Israelites of old. They are our spiritual forebears in more ways than we care to admit.

In trying to assess the life and ministry of Gideon, one needs to compare the beginning of the story with its end and then ask, “What difference did Gideon make?” If you recall, the story began back in chapter 6 where we learned that the people of Israel had fallen into virtual slavery because of the Midianite invaders who had entered their land. The Lord reminded them that his came about because of their own sinfulness, because they refused to worship the God who had delivered them from Egyptian captivity and brought them into the Promised Land. They had dared to begin paying homage to the gods of the Ammorites, in whose land they were dwelling. But when the people cried out to the Lord for deliverance he raised up yet again another deliverer, this time in the man of Gideon and he accomplished their deliverance from the Midianite threat. But listen now to the end of Gideon’s life as it is recorded in chapter 8:

27 Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his own town, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. 28 So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they lifted up their heads no more. So the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

33 As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals, making Baal-berith their god. 34 The Israelites did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side; 35 and they did not exhibit loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

And so it is that if one compares the beginning of Gideon’s ministry with the end of it, it might be fair to conclude that for all intents and purposes, Gideon’s ministry and his work of deliverance did little in permanently changing the hearts and minds of God’s people. The Israelites were virtually the same after Gideon as they were before, and as I told you in our opening study, this became true time and time again throughout the period of the judges. As soon as the people were delivered, they forgot all about God and fell into deeper sin and enslavement inevitably followed.

Now to be sure, Israel could have been worse off had it not been for Gideon but we could be sure that he would have liked for his life to count for more than it did. Surely he would like to have inspired more lasting change among God’s people and not simply some momentary deliverance. By the same token, you and I as the people of God in our time would like for our lives and the life of our church to count something constructive and lasting, would we not? We would like to believe that the world would be a better place because we have passed through. We would like to think that this community would be a nobler, finer, and more faithful place to live because of this church on the corner of Meeting and Tradd. And to be quite frank, we have an advantage over Gideon because of Jesus Christ and the gospel and the gift of the Spirit that we have received. You and I within the Christian Church ought to see with far greater clarity and insight just what the nature of the human dilemma is and just precisely how God has addressed.

Gideon may never have seen what you and I are capable of seeing. Gideon may have assumed along with many of his peers that the source of Israel’s trouble was the outside forces that attack them, like the Midianites or other oppressors that would come along. But the Midianites were the symptom of the disease and not the disease itself. Israel’s problem, like the problem of humanity today, is sin. It is the willful rebellion against and the defiance of the living God. It is placing something upon the throne of our hearts and lives other than the living God who refuses to have other gods before him. When we choose to go against God, when we choose to ignore God’s guidance, to break God’s commandments, to live in accordance with what we deem best for ourselves, then we too are destined

for some kind of enslavement, if not to the Midianites then to some other equally oppressive threat. And God's lone solution to human sinfulness is the free gift of forgiveness and salvation, seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ whom we receive by grace through faith. It does little lasting good to treat the symptoms and ignore the disease.

When the Midianites were driven out of Canaan, only half the job was done. Unless Israel chose to live in a new and right relationship with God and others, then they could expect to meet another oppressor around the bend, which is precisely what happened in the person of Abimelech.

In our gospel lesson today Jesus indicates that it is not sufficient to remove the demonic from life unless it is replaced with the divine, or else one may end up in more serious trouble than before. Eliminating evil is only half the battle. Embracing the good and the Godly is equally essential. So many church members today think their primary mission is to avoid the evil. But if they never pursue what is good & Godly their work is unfinished.

Like Gideon, we are tempted at times to treat the symptom while ignoring the disease, but we must never fail to see that the ultimate purpose behind our individual lives and certainly the life of the church is the conversion of humankind, turning humanity away from itself and toward the purposes of God. Gideon may have won the major battle of his day but he lost the war because he failed to keep before him the primary reason for his being and the purpose of his calling. Let us hope and pray that the same will not be said of us. Let us hope and pray that all we do within the church and outside the church will help to lead those we meet to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and help them to commit to worshipping the Lord above all else. If the church succeeds in every other area but fails in that, then we have failed in deed. If you succeed in every other area but fail in giving God the primary allegiance of your life, then you too have failed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.