

Sermon for Sunday, August 17, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"WHEN AMOUNT DOESN'T COUNT"

Judges 7:1-8

Text: The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many...lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.'" Judges 7:2

Gideon was in a hole. Literally, he was in a hole and it was hot - hot like a humid August day in St. Louis. And down in that hole he was working hard. He was threshing wheat. The dust of the wheat must have clogged the air and the chaff must have stuck itchily to his sweating body, as he pounded the wheat to separate the grain from the covering of chaff. Ordinarily, people don't get down in a place like that to thresh wheat. In those days, people got up on some high point where the breeze would blow the chaff away. But things were different that day for Gideon. His country was under attack by wandering nomads who came in to plunder the farms, to take the livestock, to steal the wheat. Gideon means "Grim Warrior." So here was our hero down in a hole threshing wheat so the enemy wouldn't see him. And he was grim enough, all right.

As Grim Warrior worked away at the wheat, perhaps his mind wandered back over the history of his people, Israel. Under Moses, they had left the land of Egypt behind as they crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness. There they had wandered for forty years until that dramatic day, under the leadership of Joshua, they had crossed the river Jordan at Jericho. Things had gone so well at first. As their troops spread out across the Promised Land it was as though God had gone before them. In battle after battle, they had been victorious until the land lay subdued before them. With most of the fighting over, they began the difficult process of settling the land. Back there in the desert they had been a wandering people who followed their flocks about seeking water and grazing in a sparse land. Now they began the transition of becoming farmers in a more settled and stable environment. And learning to farm had been no easy task, especially since they had to learn it from their pagan neighbors. Those neighbors not only introduced them to farming, they also introduced them to their gods on whom they depended to make farming work. It was hard for the Jews to separate farming from those gods and it was to keep them in hot water for decades.

That's how Gideon got in the hole in the first place. The Bible says, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell, but you have not given heed to my voice." And because they didn't listen to God and played footsie with idols, God let the Midianites attack the Jews - and that's when the Bible says that Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press to hide it from the Midianites.

The Jewish economy was a mess! The Bible says, "For whenever the Israelites put in seed the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up and attack them; they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or ass. For they would come up with their cattle and their tents, coming like locusts for number; both they and their camels could not be counted; so that they wasted the land as they came in."

So there was Gideon in the hole - with his nose clogged by the dust, his eyes red and irritated, with the sweat rolling off and the chaff sticking to him with itchy persistence, with his arms aching with weariness from pounding the wheat. It was at this moment that the Bible says an angel appeared to him and said, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor." Now, really! If he is such a man of valor, what is he doing hiding out in that wine press? And if God is with him - well, let Gideon speak for himself. The Bible says, "And Gideon said to him, 'Pray, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all his wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us....?'"

Well, surely you remember the next part of the story. The Angel tells him that he has been chosen to deliver Israel from the enemy, but Gideon is somewhat doubtful. He asks for a sign. He puts out a lamb's skin that night and asks God that if the angel has told the truth to let the dew cover the fleece that night, but let the ground around it be dry. The next morning the ground is dry and Gideon wrings out a bowl full of water from the fleece. But Gideon is hard to convince. He wants to put out another fleece. He asks that the next night the ground be wet with dew and the fleece dry. When he awakes the next day, the ground is covered with dew, but the lamb's skin is dry.

So Gideon sends out a call to arms to the Hebrews and 32,000 men respond. The enemy is camped in a nice green spot with plenty of water in the valley of Jezreel. And there are lots of them! The Bible says they were as a host. The Bible says they were like "grasshoppers for the multitude." Gideon and his motley group, camp on the slopes of Mount Gilboa overlooking the invaders and Gideon tries to figure out what to do next. God speaks to him and tells him to send everyone home who is scared. So Gideon tells everybody who is scared to go home and suddenly 22,000 depart. That left only ten thousand. But again the Lord tells Gideon he has too many men. He is to take them to the stream for a drink. Now, if you don't have a cup there are two ways you can drink at a stream. First, you can kneel down, put your face in the water and drink directly. Second, you can use your hand for a cup and lift the water to your mouth. God told Gideon that everyone who used his hand to drink was to be set aside to go to battle with him. There were three hundred of these.

Now Gideon was in a different kind of hole. With but three hundred to go against a multitude is surely being in a hole. Do you remember what happened? The three hundred were split into three groups. In one hand each had a trumpet, in the other each had a torch hidden under a jar. They surrounded the camp at night, blew all three hundred trumpets, broke the jars and lifted up their torches, and shouted, "for the Lord and for Gideon." The enemy went crazy! They began to fight in the dark and kill one another and finally they fled into the night. Gideon and his men had defeated an army and never lifted a sword. You see, amount didn't count.

Notice in the first place that amount doesn't count when you are obeying God. Gideon didn't go into battle with overwhelming odds against him because he thought he had a chance militarily. No, he went because God said to him, "do not I send you?" He was simply being obedient to God and amount didn't count. I don't know about you, but it really helps me to know that amount doesn't count when I'm trying to obey God. The world today seems to be going in the opposite direction from God's clear will for men. Sometimes the church seems

such a tiny dike trying to hold back a tidal wave. But amount doesn't count if we are being obedient to God rather than men. Let me say a word particularly to you young people and young adults. A recent issue of a national magazine had a major article on the swinging singles and the changing patterns in attitudes toward sex and other forms of permissiveness. It will be hard for you to go against the crowd. You will begin to feel, "well, what does it matter. I'm just one person. Why should I act differently when everyone else is doing it?" But in the long run, history will be shaped by those who are obedient to God's will. For example, when the Roman Empire was collapsing from internal moral rot, a small group of people who were obedient to God's will were meeting in the catacombs of Rome. Out of that small group of men and women was to arise what was to be known for centuries as the Holy Roman Empire. Amount didn't count. Even in the church today on every side we see rampant signs of moral decay and lack of belief. There are those who are ordained as ministers who deny the deity of Christ, who do not believe in His atoning death on the cross, who reject the virgin birth. There are those who say that the Bible is not valid, that it is not infallible, that it is not really the word of God. For those of us who trust in him and stand on the word of God, it may become necessary for us to affirm our obedience and to stand in opposition against all of that. There are many of you here visiting today who may be members of churches which are committed to "social action" so called, which denies, though, the healing, redeeming power of the cross of Jesus Christ, and it may become necessary for you to separate yourself and to stand for God - to be obedient to Him.

There will come times in the lives of all of us when God's will, God's way, God's Word will not make a great deal of sense to us. There comes those times when obeying God will seem old fashioned, out of step or inadequate. But Gideon changed the history of his nation with his three hundred men because he was obedient to God's call and amount didn't count. We're going to find it so in our lives. We are going to stand in this church for what we believe in, the Word of God, the infallible Word of God, the atoning cross of Jesus Christ who was truly God and truly man. We will be obedient to the will of God, no matter what the cost required of us.

Note secondly that amount doesn't count when you use what you've got for God. Gideon could have said, "I don't have nearly enough soldiers to confront the enemy. Three hundred men against the multitude is sheer suicide." But instead, he took what he had and he put it at the disposal of God, and that night he won an astounding victory. Amount didn't count when he put what he had at God's disposal. You know, God's doing an incredible thing in this church. I suspect we're one of the few, if maybe not one of one or two churches in this whole city, where our Sunday School is growing by leaps and bounds. That demands more teachers, and we're calling on our people to come and share in the ministry of teaching. We say, "well, I don't have much. I don't have many abilities. I don't have many talents." But the Bible tells us that if we take what we've got and put it at the disposal of Jesus Christ, he'll take it and bless it and use it in an incredible way. A lot of people say, "Well, you know, my tithe doesn't amount to much", so we don't tithe. The Bible says we're to tithe, and when we take what we've got and put it at God's disposal, He's going to bless it and use it.

You will always find that true in your life. Dwight L. Moody was an uneducated man with little talents or abilities. Yet, he set out to discover what God

could do with a fully committed man. And he set out to be that fully committed man. God took him and made a great evangelist out of him, simply because he took what he had and put it in the hands of God. Or in our own day, take Billy Graham. On his way to California, a good many years ago, to hold the first Los Angeles Crusade, which was to be the beginning of his career, he and his best friend, Grady Wilson, pulled off the road out there in the desert. They got out and knelt down side by side in the sand, and they committed themselves wholly and completely to God, and they went on to Los Angeles to initiate a career unparalleled in Christian history. Amount didn't count when they took what they had and put it at the disposal of God.

Do you remember the story of the woman in the temple who put all she had in the offering? It wasn't much, but Jesus, who was watching, said to his disciples, "She has put in more than all the rest." You see, amount didn't count when she took what she had and put it at God's disposal. Or again, one day Jesus was preaching to the multitudes and he saw that they were tired and hungry and needed to be fed before they were sent back on that long journey home. Yet, out in the wilderness, there was no food to give them. A little boy had come, and he had a little bread and a couple of fishes, and that little boy took what he had, and it wasn't much, and he put it in the hands of Jesus, and Jesus blessed it and used it to feed a multitude. That's the way life works. You may not have much ability or many talents. You may not have great qualities or much leadership. But if you will take what you have and put it in the hands of Jesus, he will bless it and use it beyond your wildest dreams! You see, in the hands of Jesus, amount doesn't count.

Notice thirdly, that amount doesn't count when you are trusting God. How would you like to have been one of those soldiers of Gideon that dark night with only a trumpet and a lantern in your hand against a foe so numerous, they could hardly be counted? Surely, they were not putting their trust in the bugle or the lantern or their own ability. Shivering in the coldness of the night, about to launch an absurd plan, they could only trust God. And when they did that, they discovered that amount didn't count.

William Carey was the first missionary to India in modern times. He felt that God was calling him to a ministry to that great pagan nation. So one lone man set out for India and because he trusted God, God opened that nation to Jesus Christ. Amount didn't count when he was trusting God.

Or look at a man like Martin Luther. Would you have thought that one, lone monk could defy the monolithic structure of the Roman Catholic Church and break it's power? No, but when Luther trusted God, when he put what he had at God's disposal, when he sought to be obedient to God's will, amount didn't count and the Protestant Reformation was born.

Again, picture in your mind's eye that man Jesus on the cross of Calvary. As he dies in agony, it seems that all he stood for, all he preached and taught, all he had said about the kingdom of God was coming to a disastrous conclusion. At the foot of his cross, the Jews who had put him there cried out, "He trusted in God, let God deliver him..." Yes, he trusted in God. Because he did, God took that cross - a symbol of death and defeat - and turned it into God's plus sign, God's symbol of victory over sin and death. This morning you and I have hope of salvation because of that very cross and that very man Jesus. Amount didn't count because he trusted God, even to Calvary.

Yes, obeying God's will, putting what we have at his disposal, and trusting him. When we do that, amount doesn't count. There is just one final thing to be said. How do you plan to get to heaven? You can have your name on the roll of the church and even attend regularly. You can give your money and do the work of the Lord. You can be a fine person with many noble deeds to your credit. You can do many things that are worthwhile. But though your good works be as numerous as the Midianites, they are not going to get you into heaven. Amount doesn't count. If you are not trusting in Jesus alone for your salvation, you will never get through the gates of heaven. What counts with God is your relationship to his Son, and though your good works be numerous, they won't be enough. Amount doesn't count. Only Jesus matters.