

Your Size Does Not Matter

May 18, 2008

Year A: First Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A new preacher from the East just received his first church home in the foot hills of Montana. He arrives in time to greet the outgoing preacher who gives him a warm welcome and helps him get established in the parsonage.

Being Wednesday now, the new preacher decides to get started on his first sermon, which he labors over for the next three days. Practice, practice, practice!

On Sunday morning, he comes to church, climbs up into the pulpit and looks down into the congregation - only to see one cowboy sitting in the first row. Somewhat disappointed, he asks the cowboy, "I've practiced my sermon for quite some time, but since you are the only one here, maybe I should just skip it. What do you think?"

The cowboy replied, "well, if I went out to the pasture to feed my cattle, and only one showed up - I would certainly feed it!"

Reassured, the new preacher lit into his text with full zeal. 45 minutes later, exhausted from his efforts, the preacher asked the cowboy, "well, what do you think?"

The cowboy replied, "like I told you, if I went to the pasture to feed my cattle, and only one cow showed up - I would feed it. . . but I sure wouldn't give it the full load!!!"¹

Today we talk about the little guy, the little gal. Today we talk about the joy of being little. No matter how tiny your voice, no matter how quite the message, no matter how small the group with God mighty things will happen.

Today is also a day we celebrate our heritage. You've already heard a report from Belle Lecher, our chair of the Committee on History & Records. You've heard what we are planning and what's going to take place one year from now. You've heard how this celebration will lift up the incredible accomplishments of this congregation and its ministry these past 124 years. But you have not heard the full story. By the time I am done with this message my goal is to share with you a little known story of our heritage. It's a story of courage, it's a story of incredible vision, it's a story about taking control of your destiny, it's a story about how even the smallest voice can move mountains.

[Judges 7:1-8 \(NRSV\)](#)

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

²The LORD said to Gideon, "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from

¹ "Wouldn't give it the full load." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 17.

me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' ³Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.' " Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

⁴Then the LORD said to Gideon, "The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; and when I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." ⁵So he brought the troops down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, "All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side." ⁶The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water.

⁷Then the LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes." ⁸So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

What a fascinating passage. There are so many things that interest me about this short piece of scripture. 1) we have a very human God who is so concerned that Israel is going to get all the credit; 2) we have some disagreement on the actual number of soldiers. Most texts stick with the number of 22,000 but some scholars believe that this number is inflated and it should be more like 320. Thus the magnitude of going from 22,000 to 300 is more tempered with the thought of starting with 320 and reducing the force to 50; 3) I read a lot of discussion over the meaning of these soldiers drinking water like dogs. Interpretations of what this means was all over the map. All of these ideas are great fodder for other discussions but today I want to focus on this small number of people – this small committed number that goes against a force 100 times their size and the only thing they have on their side is a simple trust in God. This story captivated me because of what they were able to accomplish with so little. Folks, never count out the will of the smallest to accomplish great deeds.

Darrell Loomis was a truck driver. Each week he hauled goods from Cincinnati to Atlanta. Joe's Diner was his favorite eating spot on the route. Darrell always stopped for meals at Joe's.

One summer afternoon, Darrell parked his truck and walked into the diner. Sitting down in his favorite seat – the third counter stool – he ordered the usual: hot meat loaf sandwich, mashed potatoes, and iced tea. In the distance came a roar and a cloud of dust, followed by the arrival into the parking lot of twelve members of a motorcycle gang, riding Harley-Davidsons with extended forks. These were fine bikes, quite a sight to see as the gang parked them next to Darrell's Peterbilt truck and set down the kickstands.

As the gang stomped into the diner, the leader immediately spotted Darrell. "Well, who is this little sissy at the counter?" he sneered. Darrell merely remained silent and continued eating his lunch. Forming a semicircle around

Darrell, the gang members egged their leader on. Unperturbed, Darrell just sat and ate his lunch. One of the gang members picked up Darrell's iced tea and poured it over his head. The others watched, laughing. With his napkin Darrell quietly dried his face, but said nothing. Another gang member picked up Darrell's mashed potatoes and stuck a handful into Darrell's ear, wiping his hand on Darrell's back. Darrell remained calm and didn't respond. He simply continued to eat his lunch.

Although the gang continued to harass and taunt Darrell, he never responded to any of it. Even when Darrell finished his lunch, he only stood up, turned to Joe, and silently paid his bill. He left the diner without saying a word.

The leader of the gang laughed and said to Joe, "What a wimp! That guy sure ain't much of a man!"

Joe, looking out the window of the diner said, "No, and he ain't much of a driver either. He just ran over 12 Harleys."²

Size does not matter. That sure goes against the values of our society. I was browsing on the internet the other day looking at www.cnn.com and found something interesting. It was a series of lists that this web-site thought we might want to click on. The list read like this: Fortune 500 – America's Largest Corporations. Most Admired Companies. 100 Best Companies to work for. Best Places to Live. Best Mutual Funds. Most Powerful People in Business. Each link was a list of the biggest, the largest, the best in their respective categories.

Folks, we live in tiny, little, out of the way Chadron. A place so small that when a former President comes to town (and when I mean comes to town, drives through) it is talked about for weeks. But in our small town we hear from people like Bill O'Boyle that – despite their successes over the past few years – what is needed is more money, better facilities, more full-time coaches – just so we can compete. In our small community we know of folks – friends and colleagues – that have moved on to bigger and better jobs, more prominent universities, more opportunities for advancement. And I sure hear it. Even though my letter was read today I still have people say to me, "pastor, we just know you will be heading East."

But does size matter? Do you really need a large army to defeat your enemy? Do you need the best equipment to compete in this world? Is it only the biggest and best that are successful? That's not the message that comes from God here. Not only is this force drastically reduced in size, but it continues to get smaller at the behest of God while nothing happens with the enemy. The entire time, this mighty army can only trust in God. When it comes to being mighty, sometimes your size does not matter.

A clever man was once threatened with death by a bandit but before he was to die he made a request, "be good enough to fulfill my dying wish," he said. "Cut off the branch of that tree."

One slash of the sword, and it was done! "What now?" asked the bandit.

"Put it back again," said the clever man.

The bandit laughed. "You must be crazy to think that anyone can do that."

² Wayne Rice. *HOT Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1993). 155.

“On the contrary,” said the clever man, “it is you who are crazy to think that you are mighty because you can wound and destroy. That is the task of children. The mighty know how to create and heal.”³

One does not need to be the biggest, nor the best to produce incredible results. Sometimes the greatest things in life come from the smallest group. This year at Annual Conference I am excited for I will finally get a chance to meet Ken Hicks. Hicks is a retired Bishop currently living in Arkansas. When I served at Bradshaw, a small church in Eastern Nebraska, I found out that this man had once been their pastor while attending York College. The year we were to have our Dedication service for our Building I called Bishop Hicks and invited him up to Bradshaw to be a part of our celebration. Unfortunately that day did not work for him and his wife but he told me something I will never forget. You see here was a man who in The United Methodist Church had reached the pinnacle of success. He had served one of the largest churches in Nebraska, then went on to serve as a Bishop for 12 years, a man beloved by the people he served, and he told me that he owes all of his success to starting out in the ministry in that tiny little church in Bradshaw, Nebraska.

Folks, to be successful you do not have to be big, you do not have to be large, you do not have to have all the latest gadgets, know the most people, have the best resume. Folks, to be successful you just need to follow God in your heart because with God size does not matter.

Let me tell you the story of Thomas Lewis. Lewis was a member of a denomination called the Methodist Protestant Church. In the early 1900’s they had reached their peak of membership – about 200,000 people worldwide. Not a tiny group but in comparison to other denominations they were by no means large. By the early 1900’s it became pretty obvious that his church was not growing. The promise of his forebears that helped create the Methodist Protestant Church wasn’t there anymore. 100 years before the denomination started with such promise. These pioneers left the Methodist Episcopal Church because they didn’t like being told what to do by a Bishop. The year was 1830, our country was only about 50 years old and was quite proud not to be ruled by a King. Liberty and freedom were the call words of this new nation and the thought of a church being dictated by one man – a Bishop – was unthinkable and so a group dedicated to Methodist principles but not to a Bishop created the Methodist Protestant Church where all Methodists were equal.

Well, that was then, and now the year was 1920 and this denomination realized that it needed some kind of leadership and structure. A President now ran the denomination. On the other side was the Methodist Episcopal Church. 100 years later and it became obvious that a Bishop could not act like a dictator and needed to share responsibilities and authority with other pastors. 100 years later and the differences that tore the two groups apart was barely evident.

Now Methodist Episcopal Church was a huge denomination. At the time of the Civil War it was the largest church on in the country. In the 1920’s it was not the largest, the Catholic Church had passed it up, but it was still a major force in the nation. The problem was that it was split into two groups – a northern

³ Anthony de Mello. “The mighty create and heal.” *Ibid.*, Part IV. 21.

branch of 2.5 million people and a southern wing consisting of 1.2 million members, and then there was the Methodist Protestants at 200,000, an insignificant group. The north and south had split over slavery and even after 60 years they still weren't talking much. But a divided Methodist Church was no good for the country let alone the denomination but the north and the south weren't talking and that's where Thomas Lewis and the Methodist Protestant Church came in. They knew this division wouldn't last. They knew eventually the northern and southern branches would start talking, they knew that if they didn't act now that their tiny group – their insignificant little branch of Methodism would be left out of the discussion entirely and so in 1920 they acted. Frederick Norwood, Methodist historian says of Thomas Lewis, "in appealing for union, begged that the two branches of Episcopal Methodism might merge in order that his people would not face a painful decision: 'Do not force us to separate from each other in order that we may rejoin the family. We want to unite with a united home.' Hence, in 1920 there was held in Baltimore a meeting of the Joint Commission on Federation of Nine of the Methodist Protestant Church. Out of these meetings came the Chattanooga Report, which laid a basis for future union plans for the three churches."⁴

In 1939 these three churches came together and called themselves the Methodist Church. In reality it was a huge reunion of northern and southern Methodism. Very little changed. A Bishop was still part of the church, however, the name was changed – Episcopal was left off. Why? All in honor of Thomas Lewis and the Methodist Protestants who brought these two big boys to the table. Who says the little guy, the little gal can not accomplish anything. Just ask Gideon. Just ask Thomas Lewis. Just ask the Methodist Protestant Church. God works with those who believe size does not matter. This is our heritage as the people of The United Methodist Church. Amen.

⁴ Frederick A. Norwood. *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1984.) 361.