

NO NUMBERS GAME
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Judges 7:1-7, 15b-22¹

Baseball's All-Star game last Tuesday marked the midway point of the season for us baseball fans. For years I have been a fan of the Atlanta Braves, and usually manage to get to a game once each season.

The Braves have had a run of fourteen straight years when they have won the title in their division. That phenomenal string may be broken this year, since they are well behind the hated New York Mets.

Those of us who are old enough, though, remember the days when the Braves' triumphal march through the season could not be taken for granted. In fact, prior to this string of wins, the Braves were terrible; usually by the All-Star break they would have a firm lock on last place in the standings. I remember hearing about a game in the old Fulton County Stadium, and the attendance was something like 900 people. It was pretty bleak.

In those days the Braves would try just about anything to shore up sagging attendance. One such effort was the construction, out behind the fence in left field, of a huge plastic and now politically incorrect statue of an Indian. The thing was dubbed "Chief Thunderthud." The chief had an electric motor somewhere in its innards that would cause his head to swivel and his right arm to do the Braves' chop on those rare occasions when one of the Braves' players would hit a home run.

Chief Thunderthud was something of a Thunderdud, and lasted—as best I recall—only a season or two. But I remember reading the description of this huge monstrosity in the program. It proclaimed with pride that Chief Thunderthud was four feet taller than Michelangelo's statue of David.

¹ This sermon is part of a series based on texts which do not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Let's see—the statue of David is one of the masterpieces of art, but Thunderthud is better because he's taller, right? Taller, better, higher—we have a fixation on big: the tallest building, the Grandest Canyon, the biggest Mule Day. Bigger is always better, isn't it?

Well, not always. Which brings us to Gideon, whom we might dub the Patron Saint of Small Things. Gideon's story is found in the book of Judges, which tells of a time in Israel's history before there were kings. In those early days, whenever there was a crisis, God would raise up one of these charismatic leaders to deal with it.

The crisis this time was an invasion by the armies of Midian. They were overrunning the country, and when they camped their tents were “as thick as locusts.”(6:5). The people cried out to God, and God summoned Gideon to lead the people. After some initial misgivings, Gideon agreed, and sent out the call across the land for people to join an army to oppose the Midianites. Thirty-two thousand people responded.

Thirty-two thousand. That's a pretty good fighting force, even if the enemy is as thick as locusts. Gideon had to be feeling pretty good about that response. So surely God's response to this turnout surprised him: “The people are too many.” Too many? Lord, when it comes to having an army, you can't have too many. Generals are always wanting more people to fight in their armies. What sort of strategist are you, Lord, to say that we've got too many?

But God replies: “I can't give the Midianites into your hand with this many people. You would only take credit for it yourselves, and say ‘My own hand has delivered me.’ You wouldn't know that I had done it. So tell all those who are scared to go home.” Gideon delivers the message to the assembled multitude: “Everyone who is afraid can go home,” and twenty-two thousand take him up on it and leave—sort of a military draft in reverse.

Gideon is surely feeling that God will be satisfied now—just ten thousand left. But God says, “There are still too many. Take them down to the creek and have them drink the water. Whoever kneels down to drink, set to one side; whoever laps the water with their hand, set on the other.” Gideon does so. Out of this crowd of ten thousand, only three hundred lap the water with their hand. And God says: “There's your army. With those three hundred I will give the Midianites into your hand.”

There has been a lot of discussion about this test down at the creek. Some have said that the three hundred who lapped the water showed themselves to be more alert in case the

enemy might attack. But the text says nothing about that. And in any case, the mob of Midianites would have overrun a little group of three hundred before they could get their swords out of their scabbards.

It really sounds like this water test is completely arbitrary. God might as well have said: “See which ones put syrup on their pancakes and which put powdered sugar. . . See which ones put their cell phones on a ring tone and which ones on vibrate.” The point is, there is nothing special about the three hundred. They are not better fighters, or more alert. This victory, if it is to happen, will belong totally to God.

Now for the best part: Gideon equips this puny army with strange weapons. He gives each one a torch, a pitcher to put over the torch to keep it from shining, and a trumpet. In the middle of the night he divides his army into three groups of one hundred each, and they sneak quietly into the midst of the Midianite camp. Thousands are asleep all around them. “Do what I do,” he tells them, “and repeat after me.” Gideon takes his pitcher, lifts it off the lamp and smashes it on the ground, lifting the torch of light high. Three hundred pitchers smash to the ground, and three hundred torches light the night. Gideon blows on his trumpet. Three hundred trumpets shatter the stillness. Gideon shouts: “For the Lord and for Gideon!” Three hundred voices add a little twist of their own: “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!”

The Midianites, roused from sleep, imagine they are being overrun by a gigantic army. They grab their swords and in their confusion begin fighting one another. They flee away to the border, and the Midianite threat is at an end.

It is a wonderful story. But it is more than that. It is a reminder of who is in charge, and the danger of getting too many numbers and too big for our britches. God’s speech to Gideon is right: If this had been an army of thirty-two thousand, they would have taken credit for the victory. But with three hundred there is no doubt: God did it.

God is not impressed with numbers. We are, but God is not. It is a theme that is sounded throughout scripture. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that the Lord cared for you and chose you,” says Moses back in Deuteronomy, “for you were the smallest of all nations. It was instead because the Lord loves you.” (7:7)

“Consider the mustard seed,” says Jesus. “It is the smallest of all seeds, but it grows up to be the greatest of all shrubs.”

Or the passage we read earlier: Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a little child and taking it in his arms said: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me . . .” (Mark 9:35-36)

We live in a world where bigger is better. Chief Thunderthud is bigger than David. When the mission group went sightseeing in Chicago, they did not go up in the shortest building in the city. Meanwhile, God is among the little ones at the end of the line.

The English writer Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta, India, some years ago to observe the work of Mother Theresa. He came away impressed. “Her work,” he wrote, refutes our worldly view of life. She considers it worthwhile to go to infinite trouble to bring one dying person in from the street in order that perhaps only for five minutes that one may see a loving Christian face before dying. It is a procedure which, in worldly terms, is completely crazy, but which increases enormously the beauty and the worth of being human in the world.²

As it happens, I am leaving after this service to go down to the Presbyterian church in Mt. Pleasant to preach at their 11 AM service. I am told by their minister, Emily Barker, to expect maybe twenty people. So which is the better place to preach? Which gathering is the more effective and faithful expression of God’s mission in the world? The Commissioner of the National Football League would say: Why, the one that got more people through the turnstiles and filled more seats. A bank officer would say: The one that had the bigger offering. The director of the Gaylord Entertainment Center would say: The one that really rocks out with more people. A megachurch minister might say: The one with more young adults with children. In which is the mission of God more clearly taking place? The gospel of grace would have to say: We don’t know. It’s too early to tell. Because God is not a God of numbers. As the old Scottish preacher James Stewart puts it: “We count heads. God counts hearts.”³

It’s about smallness, friends—small numbers, little children, a splash of water on the head, a piece of bread, a little cup of juice, two or three gathered in the Lord’s name. Be alert, for it is there that we see the kingdom of God coming among us. †

² *Vintage Muggeridge*, Geoffrey Barlow, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co, 1985), p. 64.

³ James S. Stewart, *King Forever*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 91.