

Judges 7:1-8

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"So Many Owe So Few"
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Text: *"With the three hundred men...I will deliver you...."* (Judges 7:7)

Human beings, especially in today's society, have often equated success with numbers. The more we have the better off we are. A successful career is measured more often by earnings rather than the happiness of the individual or by the positive impact one's life has upon the needs of the world. Yet, I am impressively amazed at the power of a few well-guided and determined people to change the world and way of life of the majority.

It is upon such people that great moments in history happen and, more often than not, upon such people God rests plans for a better way of life for all of humankind. A corporation would have hired more than the aging Noah and his family to carry on a world class rescue operation. More than the nomad Abraham would be needed by a developing company to settle the land of Israel. Moses, alone, would not have been enough for the travel industry to move all those Israelites out of Egypt. Business, economic, and political forecasters would have selected a team of research experts to predict the future and had little to do with the eccentric prophets of Israel. Even General Schwartzkopf would probably have relied on more than a young boy and his slingshot to take on Goliath and the Philistines. Our very own National Association of Congregational Christian Churches helps research, fund, and develop the possibility of new Congregational churches with the guidance of many people. Compare that to the uncertain beginnings of Christianity which God rested upon the shoulders of twelve second-career, semi-educated, and very diverse disciples of Jesus Christ.

Look at what God did with Gideon and the three hundred men who faced the armies of Midian. God destroyed the foe of Israel and thus protected the people, but God chose only those who could pass the test of faithfulness. Out of 32,000 men in the original army, only 300 were chosen by God to conquer the Midianites. God was not looking for numbers. God was not looking for anything God could get. It was not a matter of "the more the merrier" it was to give from the best. God will always work with what God has to work with. Even with the smallest numbers, great things can happen.

The cry I hear from churches in this day and age is one of despair. They lament declining membership in just about every denomination

except conservative evangelical churches. The focus is, as it has been for so many years, on the numbers. The idea being we must be failing if our attendance is down. The more we look at the numbers the more we strive for the numbers and this is not what church is all about. Church is about God's ministry in our suffering world. An adage used in the world of career counseling goes like this. *"Do what you like, the money will follow."* I will transpose that statement for the church and say, *"Do God's ministry, the members will follow."* Believe it or not, people get turned on by God's ministry. They get energized by caring and good deeds and positive transformation and a sense of well being.

Let us turn, now, to our country's own history and go back to the winter of 1778 - 1779. The time is the Revolutionary War and the place is Valley Forge. About one third the population supported the revolution, one third supported the crown, and one third remained uncommitted to either side. Out of the 700,000 men fit to fight for the colonies, only about 5,000 remained with Washington during the war's darkest and most critical hours; less than one percent. American historian Bruce Lancaster wrote of their plight. *"...in late December, the main army of the United States went into winter quarters. The men dragged themselves thirteen miles from their last camp at Whitemarsh, leaving bloody footprints in the snow. They built themselves squat log huts chinked with clay. There was no food, then there was a little, then none again. Soap was as rare as meat and flour. Bruised feet and chapped hands festered. Dirty rags, all that was left of clothing, brought on an itch that only soap and water could cure, and on the bleak plateau there was not even water. Some units had to send men on a two-mile round trip to fill heavy buckets at the creek and lug them back. Starvation, nakedness, disease, death - these were the foes that swept through Valley Forge, reducing Washington's veterans to a scarecrow army. Officers mounted guard in old padded dressing gowns or wrapped blankets. A soldier was seen keeping his post and presenting his arms properly while standing on his hat to keep his bare feet out of the snow. Foreign officers were amazed. They had never seen endurance like this."*

When we stop to think of the hundreds of millions of Americans who've since enjoyed the freedoms those few at Valley Forge preserved with their fierce stand, we ought to take pause and realize what so many owe to so few. It should also be noted that most of the men who endured that awful winter were the rejected ones from society. Washington's army at Valley Forge was made up of roughians, scoundrels, parolees, and generally despised men. Upon such as these, we became the beacon of freedom to the entire world. In general, those who believed they had something to lose probably stayed in the comforts of hearth and home that winter. Bruce Catton adds this thought, *"...the people of the*

Revolutionary period were extremely human. Enough of them, in the end, where willing to fight and die for what they believed in to make the dream come true, and we who look back at them owe them a debt whose size is almost beyond our comprehension. They did not have a very easy time of it, and if they got confused and discouraged now and then it is not to be wondered at."

What can we learn from the lessons of Valley Forge and the American Revolution and from Gideon's small army that apply to our lives today? I believe we need to avoid the safe, apathetic, and easy way that cries out in the dark reaches of our consciousness, *"Don't worry, somebody else will do it for us."* I believe we need to avoid the depressing, whining complaints which suggest we can't, we haven't, we won't, etc. Though I cannot remember the source, I once read what the seven last words of a church are. *"We've never done it that way before."* What can we learn from the real history makers and doers of the past? Instead of complaints let us offer suggestions. Let us build ideas up and not pull them down. We need to make positive things happen for God and country and help carry the load; not become an added burden.

Several years ago I saw a Hollywood made movie about Norman Vincent Peale. In the movie he preached a sermon and used this common illustration about two frogs who accidentally jumped into a large can of cream. The sides of the can were smooth and slippery and there appeared to be no way out. Realizing this, the first frog gave in to the fact that they were going to drown in the can of cream. He said his good-byes to the other frog and gently let himself slip under the surface where he gave up and died. The other frog would have none of this and began thrashing his legs trying to find a way out of the can of cream. He got tired, but he would not give up looking for a way out of his dilemma. While his legs were pumping vigorously he believed he hit something solid and with new hope began working harder. Yes, indeed, he did feel some firmness under him and around him. But, of course! His churning legs caused the cream to turn to butter which was soon solid enough for him to stand on and give him enough footing to jump from the can and find freedom.

Of course, the frog who made it out was a doer. He exemplifies the person who looks for possibilities and makes things happen. What are some of the possibilities we can be involved in to do God's ministry in our church and community? We could complain about problems in the inner city, but let's not and join in our church's Habitat for Humanity project and make a difference in what is now a budding neighborhood. We might worry about the plight of homebound people, but I ask you to consider joining our church's Partner Program and make a new friend and relieve their plight of loneliness even for a little while. We could feel hurt and

helpless about our nation's nursing home crisis, but consider discovering the uniquely excellent care at our very own Congregational Home while joining the volunteers out there. We might be discouraged with our public educational system, but I remind you that education - on a moral and ethical level - happens in the church and we always need teachers. There are many places in our church to become a possibility for God. Our music program, a church board or committee, youth work, are but a few more of the areas we have constant need. And when I say we I mean all of us who belong in this fellowship together.

I am thoroughly convinced God wants people who are doers and will be just as glad to cut loose those who cannot or will not because they're complainers and no sayers. God wants a church of quality and not merely of quantity just as was displayed with Gideon's army so long ago. The more quality the better, but as history and the bible reveal, God will do with what God gets.

God is calling us just as the Spirit did to the relatively few who responded over the centuries. Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, David, the Apostles, and yes, Gideon, functioned because they heard God's call and responded with "can do" attitudes. Now it is our turn to be a part of the few who truly turn this weary world toward a brighter future filled with the promises of God's Kingdom. With God, a few can accomplish many wonderful and promising tasks. Without God, many flounder in the uncertain darkness of a society with numerous ills. William Shakespeare wrote in "King Henry VIII", *"Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my king, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies."* Now, as it always has been, it is ours to decide. God, to this day, is forming armies to struggle against the foes of this world just as it was done with Gideon so long ago. But we are not to fight blood lust battles with sword and shield or bombs and bullets. We are called to fight the foes of the Gospel. Poverty, oppression, hunger, and all manners of evil. So be it, then, our task until it is completed. Amen.