

**TO EACH IS GIVEN:
THE GIFT OF KNOWING WHAT TO DO**

Judges 6: 36-40; Philippians 1: 3-11

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February 21, 2010

Last week, in our first sermon of the Lenten season, we talked about Paul's powerful words to the Corinthian church: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* We noted his important distinction: to each is given. And we pondered the idea, instead of giving up something for Lent, of "taking something on."

It's been interesting hearing some of you respond to that last claim in the week since. One individual came up to me and voiced what I imagine is going through the minds of many of you: *I'm fine with giving up giving up stuff for Lent,* they said. *But what is it exactly that I'm supposed to take on?* And that's the question now, isn't it? What is it we are called to do; what gifts do we possess that can be put to use in the life of the church? This is not necessarily an easy question, is it? Because it is a question of discernment; a question of calling.

Which is why one of our scripture readings today chronicles perhaps the Bible's most blatant, over-the-top instance of discerning one's call. It involves Gideon, a judge God has raised to help Israel defeat the Midianites. Keep in mind all of this is happening prior to King David and the monarchy, when Israel's power and prestige were at their peak. It wasn't long before that God had led God's people out of bondage in Egypt and through the wilderness for 40 years to the Promised Land. And now, in their new home, they were constantly fending off attacks from other nations with the help of divinely-appointed military leaders known as "judges."

Now some would think that being appointed by God would be enough for Gideon to know he was taking on the right thing. Some would surmise that being called for divine service was all that was needed to convince him that he was fit for the job and equipped to take on whatever God asked. But apparently that wasn't the case. Even though God has all but guaranteed Gideon victory in battle, he still needed to know for sure. He needed a sign.

So before going to bed one night, Gideon "lays a fleece before the Lord" – literally. A small piece of lambs wool, laid on the stone floor. And a test attached to that wool – that if he wakes to find the wool wet and the surrounding floor dry, he will know that God is behind him 100%. Night falls and dawn arrives, and Gideon wakes to find the scene just as he requested – the wool damp with moisture and the floor around it dry as a bone.

For whatever reason, though, Gideon is still not convinced. Enthused, probably. Confident, a little. But not convinced. Maybe he surmises that it's not stretching the laws of nature all that much to expect early morning dew to collect on the wool and not on the stone floor. Or maybe he just needs one more sign, one more nod in his direction to be sure, to be completely convinced that God's path for him was true.

So almost apologetically Gideon asks for a second sign – this time the reverse, a damp floor and dry wool at dawn's light. Which is exactly what he discovers the next day. And apparently that's enough. Gideon goes on to defeat the huge Midianite army with just

300 Israelites and assures himself not only a place in Hebrew history, but Hebrew lore – as the man who put God to the test with a piece of wool. Twice.

You know, I'm torn by this story – torn in the sense that I wrestle with what to do with it. Part of me really likes the clarity of it all – the clean-cutness, plain and simple; the fact that there is no middle ground, no gray areas. Twice, Gideon has confirmed for him his calling, in dramatic fashion that even the most seasoned skeptic can't deny.

I like it when life works like that, don't you? I like it when decisions I face are obvious; where doubt is minimal. I like it when I wake up in the morning and just somehow know that I am meant to have Corn Flakes for breakfast instead of Cheerios. I like it when something inside of me is fully convinced that I am to work on my sermon in the morning and go visit at the hospital in the afternoon, and not the other way around. Gideon's story celebrates this sort of picture-perfect clarity in our lives, and when it happens like that, it's a great thing!

That's what one part of feels. The other part, though, can't help but feel a little cheated by Gideon and his fleece trick – if not downright resentful of it. Because the fact of the matter is that life rarely happens like that. Sure, there are times when the planets align and the fleece comes out the way it needs to, and we have the clarification, the discernment we need.

But what happens when we wake up the next morning and check out our fleece, laid out all nice and neat on the threshing floor, and find that it's not soaking wet like we asked? Or, better yet, what if we find that both the fleece and the floor are equally damp, or equally dry – what's that telling us? So much of life is lived like this, in that nebulous “middle space,” in the places where the right solution or answer or choice isn't always obvious. And that's when living our lives as people of faith can get kind of tricky.

A relationship with a good friend is on the rocks and we're struggling with what to do. One day on a talk show we see an author interviewed who has just written a book about healing wounded friendships. Is this a sign that God wants us to make our amends? Or is it just coincidence?

We are summoned to the manager's office, and we know what's coming. Word had been getting around all week. And so, later, as we pack up our belongings, we have no clue what tomorrow will bring, or the day after that, or the day after that. It would be so much easier if we had been able to call this shot ourselves – we could've made other plans, pursued other opportunities. But now the rug has been pulled out from under us, so what do we do next?

Three colleges have sent us acceptance letters. Each has their own merits and their own hangups. There's not one factor tilting the scale in any particular direction – we wish there were! We really can see ourselves at any of the three, but the bottom line is that we can only go to one. Which one?

These kinds of things are the real stuff of life, stuff people are dealing with right now, dealing with all the time. And I struggle with how to reconcile Gideon's story with scenarios like this. How do we know what to do? And not just in life in general, but specifically in our calling to the church. I mean, *To Each Is Given* sounds nice, Mr. Paul, but it still begs the question: *what* is given?? What are our gifts and abilities? And how do we go about finding them out?

How indeed. I imagine Paul was wondering the same thing, actually. But not the Paul we met last week, writing to a Corinthian church who was letting their God-given gifts get in the way. I'm talking about the Paul in our reading today, writing to the church in

Philippi. Earlier, Jane read the opening verses; a rather compassionate and heart-felt greeting to the congregation. It concluded with this:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Now there's something we should know about this letter, something more than just the words that are being said. It's the man behind the words – Paul actually wrote this letter while he was in prison, cast away there because of his work in ministry. Throughout the letter we get the sense that Paul is honestly not sure what's going to happen – how long he'll be there, or if he'll ever get out at all. For Paul this is a telling moment: even as he is uncertain about his own future, he pleads with the Christians in Philippi to be confident in what they are called to do; to have faith in their community, to still believe.

Because that's what it all boils down to, doesn't it – believing? Believing in God, believing in ourselves? Believing that you and I are part of something bigger than us, something beyond our capacity to understand; and that we each can play a part in that “something,” if we have faith, if we can just see a sign, if we just believe....

Did you ever see that Sunday morning cartoon with the two fleas? It's two fleas amidst a forest of animal fur; each hair follicle reaching high up above the tiny insects like trees. And with a whimsical look on its face, one flea turns to the other and says, “You know, sometimes I wonder if there really is a dog.” What makes the joke funny, of course, is that even as this tiny creature is able to question its place in the universe, it is completely and hopelessly immersed in that which it questions. Doubts and uncertainties are real, but they cannot change in the least what is already there.

Author Kathleen Norris once made the observation that the Greek root of the word “believe” literally means “to give one's heart to.” This would become an important truth in her own life. As a younger woman Norris challenged furiously her Christian upbringing and was consumed by doubts – doubts, she might say, were what she had given her heart to. So she visited a Benedictine abbey and openly shared her intellectual frustrations. And she discovered, much to her surprise, that the monks were less concerned with trying to eliminate her doubts and more interested in encouraging her to embrace and celebrate them. Because, as one monk put it, “doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.”

Isn't that interesting? Makes me wonder if Gideon's fleece thing wasn't what I've always thought it was – a silly little game with God – but more of a demonstration of tremendous faith, even as he was unsure what to do? You and I try our best to follow what we perceive to be God's will for our lives. Sometimes it's obvious. Other times it's not; a mass of gray rather than the black and white we'd prefer. And we want to be sure that we do the right thing; that we make the right choices. We want to know for certain that we're “going with God.”

Sometimes, though, I have to wonder if what really matters – and what the fleece really teaches us – is that God isn't as concerned about the direction we go in as much as that we invite God to go with us wherever we go. That our task is not to figure out the

minutiae and try to align ourselves with some huge “plan” God has us, but that we embrace God and invite God on the journey with us.

So we invite God to go with us to the places where we find ourselves; the myriad of changes life throws at us. Like Gideon, we invite God to go into battle with us, uncertain as we are about the outcome. Like Paul we invite God to come with us to the places we're not sure we'll ever get out of.

And all the while we listen for God's leading – not just at certain times, but all the time. And not just that “still small voice” within us. We listen to God speaking through the voices of others in the community of faith; the things they see in us that we may not see ourselves. And when others voice what they see in us – *You'd be an excellent Sunday School teacher, would you consider having your name put in nomination to be an elder, can you help out with Friends Feeding Friends this week* – when we hear God's voice this way, we don't immediately write it off. We *have faith* that what others see in us may very well be what God sees in us too.

Because ultimately, I figure, that's all Gideon wanted. That's all Paul wanted. That's all each one of us wants on this windy journey of faith. We look. We listen. We discern. And we go. We may be surprised with what we see and hear and where we wind up. We may be surprised. I can pretty much promise you, though, that God won't be. Thanks be to God. AMEN.