

Weakness and Stewardship
Judges 7:1-8a
A Sermon by Shannon M. Cobb
Woodbury UMC
November 14, 2021

I really hate being weak. I dislike when sickness takes over, when I become bone weary and can't even think straight. I really hate when I am weak in life—when I lose control—when I don't know how the next bill will be paid...or when there will be time to get everything done. The biggest thing I hate is the weakness, the complete helplessness, to fix the things around me that are broken. I am a problem solver... and God has given me some small gifts in this area—to see solutions to complex issues. So when I can't use these gifts, it is frustrating at best and heart breaking and self-damaging in the worst.

God and I have been on a journey together for many years around control and weakness. There is one story in the Bible that helps me a lot when I struggle with weakness. We read part of it today from Judges. It is the story of Gideon and the Midianites. The background to this reading is that the Midianites had been harassing the Israelites for 7 years. It says they were like locusts and would storm in, eat everything, strip the land, slaughter the cattle. Take everything. The Israelites were hopelessly outnumbered and were just coping.

The story opens with Gideon hiding while threshing wheat in an empty wine press so the Midianites wouldn't see him with food. God sends him a messenger to tell him that God has assigned *him* to get rid of the Midianites. Like David, Gideon is the youngest son from the weakest clan. He does the “who me” act... God says “yeah, you.” After a lot of back and forth negotiations with conditions set ...mostly

on Gideon's part. Gideon goes off and does the unimaginable. He raises an army of about 30,000. As good as that sounds, this army was still much much smaller than the Midianites army. Despite this, God didn't want Gideon's people to think the coming victory was somehow won due to human strength, he wanted them to know it was His hand that did it. So he told Gideon to send away all who "tremble with fear." That was not a problem since the Midianites' army was huge, there was a lot of fear from Gideon's army.

20,000 of the 30,000 left. Now they are really outnumbered. But God was not satisfied. Still, he says, you might think you won the battle by your own hand. He tells Gideon to bring the soldiers down to the water to drink. Keep only the ones who go down and "lap like a dog" keep. Apparently not many lap like a dog so all but 300 soldiers go. These 300 are the ones God chooses to win the battle. Why? Because it isn't just the win of the battle. It's that we know—without a doubt—that God was the reason for the win.

What is the role of weakness? When we are at our weakest, we allow God to show His strength in our life. When we feel in control of our life and everything is going great because of us, we miss out on God's assurances. But there is an even worse flip side to this. If we feel we are in control and things don't go well, we end up in a cycle of self-blame and worry.

- Why didn't I see this coming?
- I should have said something.
- Why couldn't I save her?
- What if I can't fix this?

When the kids were younger, God started patiently teaching me how to embrace my weakness and turn control back over to Him. About this time, I was talking with a work colleague—he and I would frequently talk about our faith—and this day we were talking about unforgivable sins. Norm looks at me and says he only believes in one unforgivable sin...worry. Because when we worry, we tell God we don't have faith in him. I am pretty sure he was exaggerating the “unforgivable” part—Norm was also a deacon who liked to let out the occasional swear word at the pulpit just to wake people up—but I have to say his strong statement did wake me up.

Why didn't I trust God?

Now, the biggest worry I have, and the thing I want to control the most is money. Michael and I had a system with money. While Michael paid the bills, I analyze spending. I have my spreadsheets and with them I total, estimate, anticipate and designate. Every dollar is in its place. And it was with this mindset that Michael and I planned everything from child care to church giving. But God decided to show me that there could be something better and he decided to use our stewardship giving as the tool to help me see it.

I have been in the nonprofit world my entire adult career. I believe very strongly in the nonprofits sector. They are often the glue that holds our communities together, and the stories of the work they do can be very inspiring. For the first years of our faith journey together, Michael and I supported our church, because church is the best charity we knew.

- Helping bring hope and light into people's lives who are hurting.
- Giving a safe place for our children and teens.
- Offering companionship for the aging or lonely.
- A support network for over-extended people.

There are no shortages of stories to inspire charity giving. Michael and I still do a great deal of charity giving to causes that both move us and change the world. We feel great about the investments we made in the church during this time.

But sometimes we hear God's voice calling us, telling us that there is more. Something deeper we may be missing.

It didn't take long before Michael and I moved into what I will call our "Membership giving" years. We became involved—our kids were in all these activities and programs. We signed up for a small groups. We started to volunteer. We were there at least weekly—and so church became a weekly line item in the budget. If you relate to this, you know this is also a great way to give. There is a wonderful feeling of belonging—full of exploring God's love in a safe environment. It is like finding another home.

I have done a lot of work with middle schoolers at church and one time we asked the kids what their favorite place was to be in the whole world. We got many typical answers – the beach, at the pool and so on. But I was shocked when one of the kids paused thoughtfully and said "Here. I like being here." It was in the safe, nurturing environment of church that we heard God calling us closer.

It was at this time, when everything was going great, that I prayed a dangerous prayer:

“Lord, I want to know you better. I want to see you *active* in my daily life.”

Little did I know at the time but Michael had been praying a similar prayer.

Now this is a dangerous prayer because God knows what keeps you at arm’s reach from him...and it’s the things we don’t want to let go of.. worry, security, control. Inspired by others, Michael and I both started talking about trying to give a tithe (about 10% of your income). *I* was going to make it happen. I sliced and diced those spreadsheets all kinds of ways...but no matter what I did, with both of us working, I could still only get us up to about 5% before we ran out of money. We prayed about it, and a miracle happened! The year was 2008 and when the economy dropped, Michael’s finance company closed down...and without his salary, we were suddenly at a 10% tithe!

We joke about it, but what happened really was a miracle. There was absolutely no way we could pay our bills. My spreadsheets told me that...but When we were cutting expenses, we both decided to keep the church donation steady. It made no rational sense and I can only conclude we did it because God’s call to us became more urgent.

This wasn’t *trust* on my part. For me, it felt just as hopeless as Gideon felt when God told him to fight the Midianites. I was so far from solving the problem myself, that I was easily able to turn it over to God.

“Here take it...it's hopeless...but you can take over now.”

It was with great surprise, and even greater assurances of faith, that God did. Every month, we would have something come in that would offset the deficit ...the check for that consulting job...or the tax return ...and we would be ok. And each month, I would predict the same thing. “Well, I guess we are ok this month, but next month is going to be a disaster!” When the bank froze our credit line when the value of our house fell, I was absolutely sure disaster awaited. And another month went by, and we were ok.

One rainy day a car ran into the back of my car. There was hardly any damage and my car was old, so Michael and I decided to just take whatever settlement the insurance sent us. That month we were \$650 short on our bills. The settlement was \$651. When I added up my columns on that month’s spreadsheet I just stared, stunned, at the screen.

By the end of that year, we were less than a \$100 off of our bills...and, in the black. I grew more that year in my faith, then in all my years of Bible study, worship and mission. What did it? Weakness. Not being able to fix my life, made me see how God was acting in it.

The tithe that we started then and continue today helped build a relationship with God founded on real trust. It changed everything and I am so grateful for it. I found that when I trusted God, I could do so much more with my life. It was shortly after our tithe that Michael, and I took a shaky step up to become Lay Servants—occasionally leading service and preaching at other churches when the pastor was away. That was a nice stretch for me—just outside my comfort zone. But it was just

a stepping stone for Michael. I will never forget the day he looked at me and hesitantly said, he felt called to ministry. Being a slow learner... I said, "That is great dear...one day *maybe* you can go to school for that...when we have enough money saved up...when you don't need to work." We both agreed...one day, way down the road...maybe.

But God called.

Even though it was going to happen way down the road...Michael felt a need to discuss what, going back to school, *might* look like with his boss. Which prompted his boss, to break some news to him a little earlier than she intended. The grant that had been funding Michael's job wasn't renewed and he would not have a job in the New Year. The miracle was that he found this out exactly one week before applications were due for the Masters in Divinity program that started right when his job would end. We didn't have the money for school and we needed Michael to work to pay the bills. But because of the training God gave me through the Tithe, this time I heard him a little better.

I remember being scared but telling Michael that if "God wanted him to go to school, it would happen even if we didn't know how." And God did just that. Michael got every piece of his application in within a week. He received a scholarship and his dad helped us with the rest of the tuition. He started school, and when our savings was just about gone, there was a sudden shift at my work, and I was able to say "yes" to some extra responsibilities and received a raise. Just enough to pay the bills.

Michael's job to school transition happened really fast - in about one month's time. The 'me' before our tithe would never have been able to see God's call and take this leap. The additional job responsibilities are what gave me the confidence and skills to later apply for and accept the position at Ann's Place. That put us close enough for Michael to accept the position here in Woodbury.

I am so grateful for the warm welcome you have given Michael and I. We have both felt the Holy Spirit moving here in special ways.

I'm also noticing some very familiar patterns. Things I can relate to quite a lot. As a church, we are feeling a little overstretched for what is ahead. We feel weak compared to that tasks that need to be done. Looking at our shared church spreadsheets, it is sometimes hard to imagine that next month won't be a disaster. We feel God calling but we don't have the answers for how are we going to get to where God wants us to go. Guess what? That may be just where God wants us. Out of our comfort zone. Why? So we as a church can see God working among us! Michael and I believe in this call and this church very much. And in the spirit of trusting God and being out of our comfort zone, we would like to join you in paying off the mortgage. And even though a stretch for us is just \$2,000, God has already blessed it and made it \$6,000 with the generous match! God is doing great things here. And I am so grateful to all of you that we can be part of it!

So are you ready to pray a very dangerous prayer with me?

Lord, I want to know you better. I want to see you *active* in my daily life. Amen.