

November 6, 2016: Accidental Saints: Gideon

This week, we journey further into our series on Accidental Saints, looking at the everyday, ordinary people in our scriptures, who step up to do amazing things with God's prompting and power. Last week, we looked closely at the story of Joseph in our Old Testament – how he overcame every adversity that came his way – how he trusted God in the midst of the craziness of life. How instead of becoming a bitter, vengeful man when people constantly tricked and betrayed him, he trusted that God would use the messiness of life to bring blessings. Today, we are going to take a closer look at the story of Gideon to learn from his Accidental Sainthood.

The story of Gideon begins in Judges 6. From the outset, he is depicted as a man whose fear was greater than his faith. For 7 years, he and his fellow Israelites had lived in perpetual dread of the bordering Midianites and Amalekites, who repeatedly raided Israel's land, destroying their crops and stealing their livestock. Tired of hiding in mountain caves, the Israelites cried out to God for help, hoped and prayed that the God of their ancestors would save them once again.

When we first meet Gideon, he is hiding from the Midianites, attempting to covertly thresh wheat in a winepress. Now, I'm not sure how much you know about threshing wheat, but this is the process of beating out grain and separating it from the chaff – the fluffy stuff at the top of a stalk of wheat. Typically, this took place out in the open, on a threshing floor built on a hilltop, where the breeze could easily blow the chaff away. But fearful that Midianite pillagers might spot him, Gideon took cover in a winepress, which would have been a stone pit, dug out of the ground, meant to hold the grapes as people crushed them underfoot with a drainage system to catch the resulting juice. The location was far from ideal for winnowing wheat, as the dugout would prevent the breeze from blowing away the chaff, but at least Gideon would go undetected, or so he thought.

As he worked, an angel appeared and greeted him, saying, "The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior!" (v. 12) I can just imagine the incredulous look on Gideon's face as he straightens up from his work and lays in to the angel. "Really? Do you see me here winnowing wheat in a winepress? Yeah, I'm fearless! Oh, and by the way, since when has God been with us? I haven't seen hide or hair of him! If God really is with us, then why has all this bad stuff been happening? Why hasn't God acted? Saved us from the Midianites who keep terrorizing us?" The angel, who is now just referred to as the LORD, fires right back, telling him to use that bluster and frustration to defeat the Midianites.

As angry and abandoned as Gideon feels, he still doesn't have faith enough in himself, or seemingly in God, to think that he could lead his people. Gideon responds to the angel's words, "But who am I? I'm the last person you want to be asking! "My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." And the LORD simply says to him, "But I will be with you... [and you will see victory]." To these simple words, Gideon asks for proof that it really IS God calling him to this task... he demands not one, not two, but three miraculous signs to reassure him of the LORD's identity, calling, and power.

Our Gideon, who eventually does lead his people into victory, driving out the Midianites in an odd and convoluted way – a story that we won't go into today – enters into the Sainthood very accidentally. He is full of doubts, sure only of his faults and weaknesses. But even through this man, there are lessons to be learned, parallels to our stories – and maybe our victories as well. For how many of us are super confident of our giftedness? How many of us are SURE that we have what it takes to do the work that God is calling us to? I've probably mentioned before how daunting it was for me as I was wrestling with my call to ministry... the questions and doubts that plagued me. But who am I? I'm the last person you want to be asking! What if I don't have the gifts and graces to lead your people, God? What if I fail, what if I let you and your people down? I didn't even realize how similar my self-doubts were to Gideon's until I was writing this sermon! And I bet I'm not alone. How many of us have uttered those same words? But who am I?

One of the exercises I really enjoy leading church folks through is a Spiritual Gifts Inventory. While any self-assessment or gifts inventory is fraught with imperfections, it is the conversations and the self-reflection that I find most helpful and most revealing for people along their faith journey. Before I ask people to take the assessment meant to discover and identify the spiritual gifts – like servanthood, prayer, leadership, knowledge, and hospitality that God has made in them, I invite them to name what they believe their gifts to be. It's amazing to me how often people struggle to name even one gift. We are more than able to name our weaknesses, our faults and failures – but when it comes to our strengths... what we are naturally good at – the gifts that God has made in us – we balk at the concept. It is like we are all plagued with this question... "But who am I?"

In her book "Accidental Saints", Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote: "I often think that the effort we put into trying to pretend something about us is true – that we are less than we are or more than we are or that one aspect of ourselves is the whole story – is based in a fear of being really known, of being truly seen, as we actually are. Perhaps we each have a wound, a vulnerable place that we have to protect in order to survive. And yet sometimes we overcompensate so much for the things we are trying to hide that no one ever suspects the truth... and then we are left in the true aloneness of never really being known.... Sometimes, I wonder if that is what faith is: risking an openness to something bigger than ourselves..."

And THAT is the simple openness that is asked of Gideon – that is asked of us – an openness to something bigger than ourselves. To trust that when God says, I will be with you, that means that God will take us as we are – gifts, strengths, weaknesses, failures, and everything in between – that God will take and use us to do amazing things! This is the openness, the trusting, the FAITH that we are called to live into each day. This faith asks us to trust a God that we can't see – to not downplay ourselves and our gifts, but instead to have the faith that God can and WILL use us as we are, and as we are becoming.

Now, I know I've shared a quote from Marianne Williamson before, and it was shared by Tiffany McCann in our Church Council devotions a few weeks ago – but that's ok! This is exactly the message of Gideon and the accidental saints that we are all called to be!

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

So, brothers and sisters, fellow saints! Shine! Shine your light! May we not hold ourselves back by asking, 'But who am I?', but instead, go forth with FAITH, faith in ourselves, faith in our God, and faith in the amazing work that is going on within, among, and around us. Amen!