

Our Ambiguous Relationship to Power: The Story of Gideon
Gideon 6-8 Tim Dickau October 1st, 2017

The Use and Misuse of Power

Power. What is the first word that comes to your mind when I say the word power?

It's a word that can elicit a strong response. Power is a complex issue, isn't it? We need power to get things done. Power can be good. Yet conflicts over power are at the center of many of our conflicts – especially in our workplaces, but also in our families, churches and our politics. And the misuse and abuse of power fills the headlines of our news.

When Mary and I were teaching in Manila last year, we arrived shortly after the election of Duterte. The Pilipino president is the hero of many because he is using power to address drug dealing **but** he is doing it by promoting extrajudicial killings. Many Philippine citizens were glad that someone was going to do something about the drug trade. Many saw him as a man of courage. But in the eyes of the huge number protesting the anniversary of Martial law in 1972, Duterte's courage has morphed into arrogance; his solution has become worse than the problem. Signs of this are that over 50 children have been killed in these extrajudicial killings.

We've all seen ways of using power that make us squirm or shake our heads or pound our fists on the table. I am going to invite us reflect upon power this morning as read the Gideon story in Judges. I want to invite you to think about a situation or conflict you are in where power issues are central? Perhaps this a situation in which you feel disempowered, or one where power is being used badly. Hold that situation in your mind this morning. As you listen, I want to invite you to reflect on how God might be calling you to respond to that situation.

I also want to us to reflect about how we use power as persons and as a community today. What would it look like for us to model a way of using power well? I believe that how we use power in a society where power is so often misused is one of the clearest ways we can bear witness to the God in whose image we were created, and to God's differing use of power.

Gideon's story: An Analysis of Power

Over the last century, there has been a heightened attention to analyzing power. Nietzsche brought attention to this issue 150 years ago. Michel Foucault has read history through this lens of power in ways that are very illuminating -- and occasionally distorting. I bring this up because I want to follow in their footsteps and use this lens of power to read the story of Gideon today. The story lends itself to this analysis because, as Athena Gorospe argues in her commentary on Judges, power is at the center of this story. She outlines the story this way.

6:1-10 The Disempowerment of the Israelites

6:11-7:24 The Empowerment of Gideon

8:1-29 Gideon's Abuse of Power

I want to tell this story focusing on Gideon. And then I tell it a second time, noting how the writer narrates God's use of power. It's instructive.

Gideon Becomes a Leader: Power Gained

The story begins in chapter 6 with Israel being rolled over by the Midianites. Not only were they requiring the usual tribute or taxes the empire of the days did, but they regularly made raids where they ate their crops, stole their seed, ate their livestock. They were taking away their food supply -- and their hope. We get a glimpse of how beaten down and afraid they are when we are told in verse 11 that Gideon was threshing grain in a winepress. That's an odd place to harvest grain. Everyone knows that you beat out the grain in the open, preferably on the top of a hill where this wind to blow away the chaff and leave you with a nice pile of wheat on the ground. A

winepress is a small structure, built in some sheltered place. It's not the place to harvest grain. Yet it's here in fear that Gideon is grinding out the grain. You get a sense of how disempowered these people are. It's like they are back in Egypt, in slavery.

The story takes a turn when a messenger appears to Gideon followed by this fascinating dialogue. It goes something like this.

Messenger: "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior."

Gideon: "C'mon, if God is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors told us about?"

Messenger: "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian: I hereby commission you"

Gideon: "What? How can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the weakest in my clan."

God: "I will be with you and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them."

Gideon: "If I have found favour with you, show me a sign that it is you who speak to me – hold on for a sec."

Gideon runs and prepares a goat and bread and broth and offers it to the messenger, who promptly burns it up. Gideon is impressed and builds an altar right there to God. Now he knows who he was talking to.

You might think at this point that Gideon is 100% sold on this mission, gung ho, fully committed to leading his people in battle. If you thought that, you'd be wrong. Remember that Gideon like the people have been living under the arm of oppression for a generation. Pushed down. Emptied of their power. Much like an entire generation of First nations in our own history. When you have been pushed down for a generation, it's hard to get up, to find your voice, to take action. Gideon too was part of an entire generation pushed down. Some of you have grown up in families or societies or workplaces where you've been told you can't do things, you've been disempowered from acting. You know that it is a battle in itself to overcome those voices. In this story, it's going to take a little more convincing to get Gideon to act.

Given his fears, Gideon is first given a less daunting, simpler assignment. Gideon is instructed to tear down all the Baals, the idols to the gods of the peoples among whom the Hebrews lived. Gideon does it, but because he is afraid of the people, he tears them down at night so they won't know that it was him who did it. Sneaky. His trick doesn't work though. The people find out who did it, and they are angry that Gideon might be upsetting these gods.

Gideon's Dad, who owns the land these shrines are on, gets him out of this bind and protects him from this mob so that Gideon can get on with his larger task of liberating his people out from under the oppressive hand of the Midianites. Behind this hero are parents who bailed him out of trouble. Hey, who doesn't need our parents help once in a while?

Gideon is emboldened by this small victory and is now empowered to take on a bigger task. Heidi, a pastor of a creative Lutheran church in New York and one of the pastors in this co-hort I am a part of to explore the future of Christian community in North America, reminded us all two weeks ago when we together that the goal of community organizing amongst a downtrodden group is not only to change an issue but to empower people to take action for their own well-being where action is needed. One of the goals of community organizing is building the power of the people to act. It's what leaders like Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero understood and implemented. And it's the hard, behind the scenes work of so many committed community and business developers in our world, names most people will never know but who do this work faithfully and selflessly. Names of many of you in this room. You are a sign of hope to me.

A word too about baptism for those being baptized today. Like the messenger's words to Gideon, baptism is a sign and sacrament that God is with you. That assurance does give us power and strength to work for God's renewed world. I've seen that empowering role of God's Spirit in many folks who get baptized and flourish in their work for God's restoring work in the world. People who learn the truth that Paul writes about. In times of testing, abundance or want, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

This affirmation and the initial success Gideon experiences prepares him for the role that critical role Yahweh will give him. And now Gideon is ready. Well, almost. He decides that it wouldn't hurt to have just a bit more assurance. So he asks God for one more sign.

Laying the Fleece

And here's where we get the rather famous story of the fleece. Gideon: "I'm going to lay a fleece on the granary floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said." The fleece is not really put out to find out what do – because God has already told him what to do – instead of figuring out WHAT to do, Gideon is trying to figure out IF he will do what God has told him.

So Gideon lays out this fleece and in the morning it is covered with dew, while the ground is dry. And now Gideon is fired up and ready to go to battle! Sort of.

Gideon: "Don't let you anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make another request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew." After all, the fleece might have retained the dew more than the ground in the first test –if the dew was on the ground but not on the fleece, this would be more convincing. And when Gideon awakens in the morning, guess what – the fleece is dry and the ground is wet. And now Gideon is ready.

He gathers his army, a large army from across a number of Israel's tribes. But, before they go fight, Gideon is instructed by God to send home anyone who is afraid. That took care of a bunch of men. Then Gideon sends home those who cupped the water in their hands to drink at the river. Eventually this large army is reduced to only 300 men. Three hundred. Three hundred men to fight an army of over 100,000. Crazy!

Now you can understand why Gideon was uptight at that point. At this moment, Gideon is given a sign of assurance, without even asking. When he arrives at the valley where the Midianites were encamped, in their tens of thousands, Gideon sneaks into the camp of the Midianites. And he overhears one of the Midianites sharing a dream with his mate. A dream which he interprets to mean that his own people, the Midianites, are going to be crushed by a big loaf of bread, whom the mate of this Midianite believes is a metaphor for Gideon.

Well the interpretation of the dream is enough to bolster Gideon's courage. That very night, he instructs his men to surround the Midianite camp. Then in a move of surprise, the Israelite men start smashing jars, waving their torches and blowing their trumpets. The Midianites are so freaked out by this unexpected battle cry that they erupt into a crazed fighting spree, every man for himself, killing off one another in their attempts to flee from the valley.

At this point, Gideon calls out the tribe of Ephraim and they pursue the Midianites until they capture the Midianite leaders. And they chase the Midianites and the Ammonites far into the east in order to drive them out of the land for good.

So Gideon does liberate his people from the stifling injustice of the Midianites. This fearful, uncertain man leads this tiny army into victory. Gideon becomes a leader. A hero.

The Hero's Downfall / Power Abused

And what happens next? In his new found confidence, Gideon becomes the leader they always longed for. NOT! Instead, Gideon goes on a rampage against one of his own tribes in revenge for their lack of hospitality to he and his men on their way back from the battle. He wipes out an entire town and kills all the men in it. He takes 70 wives, a way to confirm his status as one of the men in Israel.

When Gideon returns to his own tribe as the victorious warrior, the people want to make him their king. Gideon refuses. But nevertheless, he acts like a king, asking for a share of their gold from the plunder. That share added up to 43 pounds of gold, more than a few sheckels. And Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which may have been like a gold coat adorning a statue. And that part of the story ends with these words. V. 27, chapter 8. "All Israel acted immorally by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family".

If you read the story yourself, you will notice that like many Biblical characters, Gideon is given two names. Gideon, and Jerubbael.. The meaning of these names is ambiguous, especially the second one: Gideon means something like drive while Jerubbael means something like Baal is Great or perhaps One who contends with Baal. The ambiguity of the names makes us wonder as we read the story: who is this guy really? Where does his loyalty actually lie?

Gideon's story is of a man among an oppressed people who rises up to courageously deliver his people only to be corrupted by his new found power. As such, the story reads as a warning for us. John Adams, signature on the US Declaration of independence, wrote these words that seem apropos here: "Because power corrupts, society's demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases."

As Gideon's power increased, he went the opposite direction. As you gain power in your life, or your work, are your moral authority and character keeping pace?

Yahweh's Story: The Story of an Empowering God

Now I want to tell this story a second time to you. But this time, I want to focus on the other main character in this story. Yahweh, Israel's God. How does God use power in this story?

Yahweh's identity is affirmed right at the beginning of the story. When the people of Israel cry out to their God, the Lord reminds them of the divine identity. Verse 8 of chapter 6: "I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors". This is the God of liberation, the God who has a keen eye out for the oppressed.

In order to liberate Israel, God calls Gideon. Like most of the people God calls, Gideon is not your obvious choice. Gideon is reluctant, sceptical, afraid, a weak man from a weak tribe. Yet this is who Yahweh chooses. Read the Bible and you discover it's a regular part of God's game plan. And consider what God does with Gideon.

1. First, the messenger of God confirms to Gideon that he is capable of the task God will give him. "You are a mighty warrior" the angel tells him.
2. When Gideon tells the messenger that he's got the wrong man, God speaks to Gideon. God commissions him and assures Gideon of his presence. "I will be with you and you will deliver your people from the Midianites."
3. When Gideon runs off to gather a sacrifice for God to ignite, God assures Gideon that he will wait for him.
4. When Gideon asks God to give him a sign of affirmation, God burns up the sacrifice.

5. When Gideon fails to tear down the Baals in daylight out of fear of the people, God does not look for a new leader but continues to be with Gideon, sending his Spirit upon him.
6. When Gideon asks God to first make the fleece wet and then keep it dry, God fulfills this request both times.

Over and over again, God keeps giving Gideon what he needs in order to build him up for the task at hand. This is an empowering God.

But God doesn't send Gideon to fight with a mighty army. In fact, it is really no army at all. This is actually a common feature in many of Israel's battles; it almost as though God fights for them and they are merely called to show up. Think of the battle of Jericho and Joshua when the walls came tumbling down. The point is clear: God is the one who delivers his people.

The writer tells us why God did this in chapter 7:2. The Lord said to Gideon "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her..."

It is ultimately God who delivers the people –not any judge or king - and God makes it plain to them by sending a few hundred men to fight a military machine. The story serves as a critique of the upcoming monarchy that the people would eventually demand. Instead of turning to God as their source of power, the Israelites wanted a king like all the other nations who would make them "feel" secure with all his horses and chariots. God honors the request, but the people would bear the cost by often becoming the pawns and serfs for their kings.

When Gideon defeats the Midianites, he falls prey to the very temptation that God names. What's very revealing is that following the victory over the Midianites, God is hardly given a mention **from this point on** in the story of Gideon. When Gideon goes on to strike down the men from the town of Succoth, one of his own towns, or when Gideon takes the gold the soldiers have plundered **for himself**, we don't hear any more about Gideon turning to God, relying upon God, seeking God's direction and assurance. Gideon doesn't need God now. He's the man. He takes what he wants. His new found courage in the power of God crosses that fine line to become arrogance in his own power and status. It sounds like the story of western history since the Enlightenment. It highlights too the danger for anyone to lead **apart** from a life of reverence for the God. Apart from that reverence for the one who is over all and for all, we will always be prone to despair on the one side or arrogance on the other. If you are leading, take note. Keeping an active reverence for God matters.

Don't Trust Superheroes

The story of Gideon calls into question both our irreverence for God, and our penchant for superheroes. The second of these was part of Israel's ongoing problem. And the problem goes on today. In the Philippines, Duterte had that kind of swagger that people were attracted to. I'm the guy. I'll get it done! But many of its citizens are now realizing what the cost of that leadership is.

Why do we so readily put our faith in leaders who use power in just the opposite ways in which we see God doing in this story, or in the way that Jesus both modelled and taught? His words continue to challenge anyone who leads: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The God revealed in Jesus uses power differently than we so often do. God empowers the people. God uses power to act on their behalf, to liberate them. What the book of Judges makes us long for is not more superheroes. Rather, the book cries out for a people who will live under the authority of God who values each human being, and for leaders who will lead for the good of their people, not towards the consolidation of their own power and wealth. In that light, I think the book of Judges is exactly what we need to be reading in our world right now.

I believe that we have a great opportunity as a church, both in how we function in our life together, and in our personal and corporate engagement with our city. The opportunity is to use power in the way of this God we meet here in Gideon's story. What would it mean for us to use power in the way of the God we meet in Gideon's story, the God revealed in Jesus?

If we live out that vision, we will be gospel people, a people of good news.

Conclusion

Back to the question you were holding. How is God calling you to respond to that situation?

God is with us. Come and find courage for the response God is calling you to today.