

**August 20, 2017**

**TEXT: Judges 7:1–9, 19–22**

**TITLE: Judges' Wisdom: A Strength Not in Numbers**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Numbers are everywhere. They are an unavoidable part of our world. Numbers on the gas station pump, the grocery store check-out register, the PIN codes we punch into ATMs. Some numbers make us smile—this past Thursday, church member Lois Fetzer turned 100 years young. She's in a wheelchair now but still sharp and thoughtful. I visited with her and then I went down the hall to visit and talk and pray with another church member, Gladys May, who is only 97. Numbers are funny things: the stock market numbers going up and down; the number of Lombardi trophies won by the Steelers or the number of games back from a playoff position for the Pirates. It is easy to fixate on numbers—but sometimes, even when a story seems to be all about numbers, it's not. It's about something else, something stronger and truer than mere numbers.

The story of Gideon and the Midianites seems to be all about numbers. For seven years the Midianites had impoverished the tribes of Israel—plundering their fields, capturing their livestock, forcing people to hide in caves for safety. An angel of the Lord came to Gideon and told him to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon argued that his tribe was the weakest and he was the least in his family, but the angel said, "I will be with you." (Judges 6:1–16)

The Midianites had a huge army of 135,000 men. Gideon managed to raise a tribal army of 32,000. God said to Gideon, "You have too many soldiers. You would only take credit for victory yourselves. Send some home." So Gideon said if you are fearful of battle, go home—to which 22,000 did just that. Now he had an army of 10,000 men, which God again said was too many. So as they went to the river to drink, those who put their faces in the water and drank were sent home; those who cupped water and lapped it up like a dog were told to stay—300 men in all. The numbers in this story pile up: 135,000 on one side vs. 32,000—no, 10,000—no, 300 on the other. The Israelite army is down to less than 1% of its original size. But are numbers really what this story is about?

I was part of an interfaith clergy group who attended the Friday night Shabbat services at Temple Sinai on Forbes Avenue. During that service, they read a letter from the President of the Reform Judaism Congregation in Charlottesville, Virginia, part of which I'd like to share with you. It began by offering condolences to the families of the three people who lost their lives last Saturday. Then he wrote this: *On Saturday morning I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired after the police department refused to provide us with an officer during morning services. Forty congregants were inside. For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Several times parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting "There's the*

*synagogue!” followed by chants of “Seig Heil” and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance and to please go in groups. This is 2017 in the United States of America.*

*Later that day I arrived on the scene shortly after the car plowed into peaceful protesters. It was a horrific and bloody scene. We learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue. Fortunately it was just talk—but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises. Again: This is America in 2017.*

40 people inside a synagogue. Crowds chanting Nazi slogans; racist slogans; violent slogans. America in 2017. Again, the words of the congregation’s president: *Local police faced an unprecedented problem that day, but make no mistake: Jews are a specific target of these groups, and despite nods of understanding from officials about our concerns—and despite the fact that the mayor himself is Jewish—we were left to our own devices. The fact that a calamity did not befall the Jewish community of Charlottesville on Saturday was not thanks to our politicians, our police, or even our own efforts, but to the grace of God.* (Alan Zimmerman, president Congregation Beth Israel)

Lord, our eyes are tired of seeing images of violence, racism and hatred—videos on the news and on our phones; photos of flowers laid out again and again at roadside memorials to honor fallen innocents; troubling reports of America in 2017. Lord, we long to see something else. Tell us again about the Kingdom of God... As we make our request to the Lord, perhaps we expect to hear about huge numbers of angels and archangels committed to watching over us; about legions of saints and martyrs robed in white before the gates of heaven. Perhaps we expect to hear about the church universal—the billions of believers of Jesus Christ active in the world today, the millions of Christians in this country, or the hundreds in our own congregation.

But Jesus said long ago—and says again today—*What is the kingdom of God? To what should I compare it? It is a tiny mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden that grew and became a tree. It is like a dash of yeast that a woman took and mixed in with mounds of flour until the entire dough was leavened.* That’s not what we expect to hear. The Kingdom of God is a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast? That feels numerically so small, so ineffectual.

Gideon had assembled a pretty good-sized army—32,000 fighting men. He ended up with 300—less than 1%. Such was the plan of the Lord. And that wasn’t the only time God worked that way. Jesus was crucified on a cross surrounded by mobs of people, jeering and celebrating his death. A few women also stood there at the cross, mourning for this death of their innocent rabbi—their group amounting to far less than 1% of the crowd that day. Those same women would later visit the tomb and discover Christ’s resurrection, racing back to tell the other disciples gathered in the upper room—a group

of disciples far less than 1% of the people in that part of Old Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples would meet and pray and break bread together, until a few weeks later they were sent out into a much larger crowd on the Pentecost harvest feast day. They would talk in other languages and share the gospel story, converting thousands even though they were far less than 1% of the crowd in the city that day. Over and over again this pattern was repeated. Lydia gathered with other women by the riverside, and having learned about Christ from Paul, she began a small house church of believers although her group was far less than 1% of the Philippian community. When Rosa Parks was arrested, a group of clergy gathered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on December 2, 1955 and after electing the young pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. to lead their effort, they announced a citywide bus boycott to begin three days later—although their entire group at that moment was far less than 1% of the community.

1%—that phrase currently has a negative connotation. We like to say we are the 99%; others—the wealthy, elite, privileged beneficiaries of unjust policies—are the 1%. Yet if percentages and numbers are how we understand our place in the world, then it's time now to turn it upside-down. It's fitting that tomorrow there will be an eclipse of the sun—when the blocking of the sun allows us to see what was there all along but hidden from sight. Perhaps it is finally time to quit being blinded by numbers—by shiny popularity polls and bank account ledgers—and to see with “totality” eyes what God has in mind for us and all humanity.

It's time to be the 1%. To be the faithful 1% beside Gideon, the 1% at the tomb, the 1% in a closed-door meeting making decisions that show forth the power of God's justice in a broken and hurting world. Yes, we will speak out against Nazism and demonic ideologies of white supremacy. The Greatest Generation did not fight and sacrifice so much in order for white-shrouded specters from old history books to appear in flesh and blood devilish form on American streets today. We will speak out against racism and anti-Semitism and blind prejudice, as if any God of heaven and earth could be honored by words demeaning God's people or seeking to harm God's children.

To do this means at times we will look around and count the heads in the room and know that we are vastly outnumbered, but we will speak up anyway. We will sit around our tables and occasionally know our views are in the minority, but we will open our mouths anyway. We will see a person on the margin for whatever reason—gender, age, sexual identity, nationality—and we will move to be beside them. Together we may not amount to even 1% of the group at hand, but then when have Christians ever worried about numbers? We are mustard seeds. We are yeast. To paraphrase the Charlottesville synagogue leader, we are saved not by politicians or police or even our own efforts, but by God's grace alone.

God's grace saves us. That grace is our hope, our resurrection joy, our strength and confidence. That grace is the Kingdom of God—and if sometimes we are just 1%, so be it. It is enough.

AMEN

