

# Faithful Fruitful and Free

September 20, 2008

Burlingame UMC

Judges 7:1-8, 16-23

Mark 11:12-14, John 8:31-36

According to the FBI, most modern-day bank robberies are

***"unsophisticated and unprofessional crimes," committed by young male repeat offenders who apparently don't know the first thing about their business.***

For instance it is reported that in spite of

the widespread use of surveillance cameras,

***76 percent of bank robbers use no disguise,***

***86 percent never study the bank before robbing it,***

***and 95 percent make no long-range plans for concealing the loot.***

What follows are: seven rules for would be Bank Robbers

**I took this from the internet**

1. **Pick the right bank.** You don't follow the lead of the fellow in Anaheim, Cal., who tried to hold up a bank that was no longer in business and had no money. On the other hand, you don't want to be too familiar with the bank. A California robber ran into his mother while making his getaway. She turned him in.
2. **Don't sign your note.** Demand notes have been written on the back of a subpoena issued in the name of a bank robber in Pittsburgh, on an envelope bearing the name and address of another in Detroit, and in East Hartford, Conn., on the back of a withdrawal slip giving the robber's signature and account number.
3. **Avoid being fussy.** A robber in Panorama City, Cal., gave a teller a note saying, "I have a gun. Give me all your twenties in this envelope." The teller said, "All I've got is two twenties." The robber took them and left.
4. **Don't advertise.** A holdup man thought that if he smeared ointment on his face, it would make him invisible to the cameras. Actually, it accentuated his features, giving authorities a much clearer picture. Bank robbers in Minnesota and California tried to create a diversion by throwing stolen money out of the windows of their cars. They succeeded only in drawing attention to themselves.

5. **Plan your getaway.** Avoid the sad fate of the thieves in Florida who took a wrong turn and ended up on the Homestead Air Force Base. They drove up to a military police guardhouse and, thinking it was a tollbooth, and offered the security men money.
6. **Provide your own transportation.** It is not too clever to get on a public bus and use that as your getaway car. The robber was caught 4 blocks away.
7. **Consider another line of work.** There was the case of the criminal in Swansea, Mass., who, when the teller told him she had no money, fainted. He was still unconscious when the police arrived.

Frank Gomez, a chaplain at the State Prison in Salinas told me that when he was counseling a young man the man said to him

***“I am beginning to realize why I keep ending up in jail.”***

This was the moment of truth that every chaplain waits for:  
the inmate’s insight into his problem.

***“You have made a big step forward. You now realize where you went wrong.”***

The young man raised his head, ,

he looked Frank in the eye and slowly and deliberately said,

***“Yep! I keep using the same lousy lawyer!”***

Another prison psychologist developed a questionnaire (Lawrence Peter) which he had prisoners fill out.

One question asked “\_\_\_\_\_ is the best policy.”

Every single inmate filled the blank with the right answer *honesty*.

From which we can conclude:

***“There is a big gap between what people know and what they do.”***

Looking at the average church and the average Christian,

***there is also a big gap between what we know and what we do.***

From this sermon I want you to remember three words

**FAITHFUL, FRUITFUL AND FREE**

**READER:**

*1 Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod.*

*The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. 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, 3 announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' " So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

4 But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

5 So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." 6 Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

7 The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place." 8 So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.

Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley. 16 Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.

17 "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. 18 When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon.' "

19 Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. 20 The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars.

Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" 21 While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.

22 When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath. 23 Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites.

The Old Testament text is the story of Gideon.

He is a **fascinating and remarkable character.**

The author of Hebrews lists him

**as first of the great heroes of the faith.**

He was a strong military leader, yet he was a modest man.

After one of his victories he could have been crowned king,  
but instead he said “no” and went back home  
to his village, to his farm, and to his family.

He was a good judge of human character.

He helped restore family life in terms of its faith in God...

You heard the story already...

let me share with you some of the lessons it teaches us.

If we were to summarize all the lessons into one sentence it would be:

*We, You and I, are not called to be successful,  
we are called to be faithful.*

The real point of all the numbers business in this story about Gideon  
was God’s reminder

*that it is the presence and power of God that makes the difference,  
and not all of the things that human beings think  
go with success.*

**WE ARE NOT CALLED TO BE SUCCESSFUL, BUT TO BE FAITHFUL**

Now let me give you the lessons in terms of sub-points.

The first sub-lesson is, God *frequently calls upon those who don’t feel up to it.*

God specializes in calling the reluctant:

*When you feel ready for the challenge, God is least likely to call you.*

Some interpreters even go as far as to say that

*God deliberately chooses the least fit.*

*And don’t tell me that is how I got to be your preacher.*

The second sub-lesson is THE VICTORY OF GOD.

*Whenever we are most ready to go it alone, we are most likely to be defeated.*

In fact that is the point of the passage we just read. God was saying to Gideon

*“Look, you’ve got too many people to win the battle,  
for if you take that many people and win, Israel will say,  
“look what we have done.” so we’ll do it differently.”*

**God's power changes the odds.**

*The odds in the beginning were about 32,000 to about 135,000...*

*So God reduced the number to 10,000 to 135,000*

And still God wasn't satisfied.

*So he reduced the odds further to 300 to 135,000.*

Then God said,

*"All right, now we're ready."*

**The third Sublesson is THE FEARFUL WON'T MAKE IT**

Remember the first real test was the test of fear,  
and Gideon lost 22,000 of his troops that way

God Said

*"Ask them who's afraid, and all who are, send them home."*

**The fourth sublesson is that THE ALERT WILL MAKE IT**

That is the point of the water test...

*God chose those who were alert and ready,  
those who stood to drink ...*

*dipping water in their hands and lapping it up,...*

*being alert to what was happening around them.*

So I think we are called to be alert and ready.

**The last sublesson is that**

**every one of the faithful will be God's in his or her own place.**

That is the point of Judges 7:21

*"And every man stood in his place around the camp.*

*Three hundred was all they needed, but everyone to be in place."*

So that when you and I are called

*we are called not to succeed but to be faithful,*

We are called, not because we are ready

*but because God chooses us.*

**Remember, the power and presence of God will change the odds  
and victory will be because of God,**

*not because of our power, Nuclear or otherwise.*

**Remember, you won't make it if you are afraid  
and we may make it if we are alert.**

The real question is  
**whether you and I will be faithfully standing in our places.**

**Even when we think we are not able to do what we are called to do,...  
by the power of God we become able.**

The Next passage comes from 3 verses in the Gospel of Mark 11:12-14.

*"On the following day when he came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it."*

Most preachers avoid talking about this text: It apparently reveals  
a negative judgmental and unreasonable picture of Jesus:  
**How can you condemn a fruit tree for not having fruit out of season?**

Some Commentaries say:

***Its a symbolic rejection of Judaism.***

Others say

***it is a mystical prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem.***

Others just say

***Jesus was tired and irritable that day.***

Others escape the whole problem and say

***"Jesus didn't say it at all....***

***After all Luke doesn't even include it in his Gospel."***

I think Jesus did say it and that it speaks to us today.

***The main theme is life without fruit is worthless.***

***Life demands some fruit, some return for its gift of life....***

***What fruit does your life have to show for itself?***

Be careful, because

***some of the things we think are the good fruits of our lives  
Jesus wouldn't think are fruits at all.***

*Some of the things that you and I get excited about achieving  
may not be worth noticing.*

I like the story about somebody who picked, purely at random 15 friends,  
and sent them an E-Mail with only one word in it,  
*“Congratulations,”*.

13 people wrote back very nice E-mails about  
*“how did you know?” and  
“isn’t it wonderful, you were thoughtful to tell me.”  
And went on to tell about something they had done.*

Only two people wrote and said  
*“Congratulations for what?”  
Some of the things we think are our fruits are hardly worth noticing.*

I think another key point of this passage  
is to recognize it as a dramatic way of saying  
*that our Lord expects us to bear fruit even out of season  
--Even when times are not ripe....  
when the circumstances are not of our choosing,  
when everything seems wrong,  
even when we have been asked to do a difficult and disagreeable thing.*

The real discipline of Christianity is in being a faithful and productive servant  
*in the midst of people and situations we may not like.*

I had a friend in college  
who always was making plans for the time when he “made it.”  
He had stacks of *notes to himself:*  
*plans, projects all waiting for the time when he made it big.*

The trouble was that he never could succeed where he was  
because he was always waiting for a more opportune time to shine.

*The Lord expects us to bear fruit out of season  
even when times are not ripe for us.*

**We are called to be fruitful**  
**In your grief...be fruitful**  
**In unemployment.... be fruitful**  
**If you don't feel like it... be fruitful**  
**If you have too much to do...fruitful**  
**If you are sick and tired....be fruitful**  
**if you are having too good a time...be fruitful**  
**If you are on vacation...be fruitful**

**Wherever we are,**  
**Whatever our time, whatever the season, Whatever the situation;**  
**...we are called to bear the fruits of our faith -**  
**the fruits of our commitment--**  
**the fruits of our stewardship.**

**The places where we now are, no matter where they are...**  
**welfare or millionaire, rental or mansion,**  
**office or classroom, home or on the road..**  
**wherever we are we are to be fruitful.**

**Remember the fig tree:**  
**We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful.**  
**We are called to bear fruit**  
**even when the odds seem to be against us.**

**READER:**

**John 8:31-36 (New International Version)**

**The Children of Abraham**

**31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

**33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants<sup>[a]</sup> and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"**

**34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."**

**A brief word about our third text:**

**"If you are faithful to what I have said, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."**

**Freedom has nothing to do**

***with being able to do all the things we have always wanted to do.***

**That is confusing freedom with license--license to do anything.**

**Galatians 5:13**

***“For you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.***

***Freedom to drink can lead to a terrible slavery to alcohol.***

***Freedom to do what you want when you want to may mean flunking out of school or losing your job.***

***Freedom to use drugs may mean death, or disgrace, and losing other things you love.***

***Real freedom has to do with discipline.***

***It has to do with commitment.***

***It has to do with the knowledge and secure feeling of knowing why and where and when.***

**If you want to be free to be a professional athlete:**

**It means hard work, dedication and a sense of destiny and staying away from the things that can tear you down.**

**The freedom to play great music comes from the discipline of long hours of practice.**

**The freedom to really love only comes with commitment to love in good times and in bad.**

**In Jesus of Nazareth we see:**

***the very embodiment of freedom, freedom that is disciplined.***

**Jesus says**

***“The Son will make you truly free.”***

**I think this is what he is talking about...**

***the freedom that is excitement,***

***the freedom that is challenge,***

*the freedom that comes with a sense of knowing  
who you are and whom you serve,  
and doing it with a sense of accomplishment.*

Now the question for us is:

*What are we going to carry home with us this morning?  
Are we going to know more about the Christian faith  
but live the same way we have in the past?*

*Are we going to be like those prisoners  
with a tremendous gap between what we know and how we live?*

I hope not.

*I hope we will carry home a sense that we are called to be faithful.  
I hope we will have a sense that we are called to be fruitful.  
And I hope we will have a sense of freedom*

The challenge of September before us is the challenge of priorities:  
the Schools and clubs all want your time, your talents and your energies.  
Remember who you are and who it is we serve.

*Be sure about your goals.*

*Be specific:*

*are the things you are doing in your life consistent with your calling by  
God?*

*The place where you are  
is the place where you are to bear fruit.*

*The place where you are  
is the place where you are to be faithful in His service.*

*The place where you are  
is the place where all the excitement is.*

*I hope in all this that you remember your membership vows to this church  
to uphold it with your prayers, your presence,  
your gifts and your service.*

*That you would according the grace given you live a Christian life  
and remain a faithful member of Christ's Holy Church.*

***I hope you will go home today  
committed to build up this part body of Christ.***

***I hope you will be committed to making this congregation  
warm, loving, forgiving,  
and a fellowship of persons deeply committed to Jesus Christ.***

***I hope you will go home today deeply committed to be in mission.  
Not just in India or Africa... (That is very important)***

***But also in mission here in Burlingame or Mildbrae,  
or San Mateo, or Hillborough or wherever you live.***

**A number of years ago a Peanuts cartoon came out that really grabbed me.**

**Lucy is in her psychiatric booth.**

**It costs 10 cents your remember, and Charlie Brown says,**

***"I never felt lower in my life. I don't seem to fit in anywhere.  
I don't seem to belong. Everything I try is a disaster."***

**Lucy the psychiatrist replies:**

***"Well Charlie Brown, try looking at life this way. People are like a deck  
of cards. We're all part of the deck. Some are aces, some are tens, some  
are nines or twos. We can't all be face cards, can we? We can't be all  
kings and queens."***

**Charlie brown says,**

***"No I guess not."***

**Lucy says,**

***"Maybe you're the two of clubs, Charlie Brown."***

***"I doubt it,"***

**he replies,**

***"even the two of clubs takes a trick now and then."***

**God said to Gideon,**

***"I'm going to make you the two of clubs, so you will know who I am. And  
when you and I together have triumphed you will say, Praise be to God! --  
even the two of clubs took a trick."***

And God says to the United Methodists of Burlingame,

*“I’m going to make you the two of clubs, so you will know who I am.  
And when you and I together have triumphed you will say,  
Praise be to God! Even the Methodists took a trick.”*

You and I are called to be faithful,

to be fruitful,

and to be free in our commitment to the Lord.

*It is in this spirit that we come together to worship,  
and it is this spirit that we go forth to serve.*