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Sermon Transcript: Introduction to Judges

You know, being a guest preacher is kind of like borrowing somebody's car. The settings aren't the same and you turn on the radio and it's a station you've never heard of before. But it is a privilege. I appreciate the session and Alex and Pastor Rob giving me the opportunity to help lead worship today. Of course, I usually sit with Patty and Ryan. There they are. Yeah, Ryan just acknowledges, shaking his head. Yeah. Good.

So, as Alex and I talked through, I'm an Air Force chaplain serving at Scott Air Force Base. My family and I arrived here a year ago last month. So, it's been fantastic and we appreciate this opportunity to find home here at First United. I'm actually a member of the Florida Presbytery. I was pastoring a church in Fort Walton Beach, Florida when I came on active duty. So that's my home presbytery right now. And the most important question I know you're trying to ask and figure out: I'm 6'4". So that's why the pulpit seems—so I even brought my reading glasses in case I couldn't read my own notes, but I think I'm good.

I appreciate Mariah. She read a—I would say a fairly unusual scripture passage. I would challenge you to find another passage where there is toe and thumb amputation in the story. It does not happen. So, Mariah, thanks for taking on that challenging passage. And also, you know, she took on some very challenging biblical names. Of course, we all know you pick a way to say it and you do it because everybody else is saying, "Phew, I didn't have to read that one out loud."

Entering the Book of Judges

But as I mentioned, today we begin a journey. A journey through the Old Testament book of Judges. Admittedly, we don't open Judges that often. We may recognize some of the names of the judges—and just for clarification, they're not wearing robes and they don't carry gavels. Names like Deborah, Gideon, maybe the best well-known, Samson. He's the one that had the long hair and he was engaged, betrothed, married, dating Delilah. And so there's that whole story. It's one that we recognize.

But Judges is the story of Israel after the death of Joshua. We know the nation Israel: they leave Egypt, the Red Sea is parted, they spend those 40 long years in the wilderness. Then they finally cross the River Jordan now into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land that God promised to them. And they still have some work to do. The story certainly has a

historical context within the biblical narrative, but it's much more. It is a story of God delivering God's people from the mess they create. Sounds familiar?

Now, of course, the book of Judges is set against God's instruction to them. As Israel prepares to enter the promised land, God instructs and commands them on how they will conduct themselves very clearly and explicitly. In Deuteronomy 7:24, it states, "He will hand their kings over to you, and you shall blot out their names from under the heavens. No one will be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them." God gives Israel explicit instructions, rules, and guidance for how it is to live, thrive, and be the people of God. The people were to destroy the ungodly inhabitants in the land so that Israel, the 12 tribes, would not assimilate into this wicked culture and idol worship, which understandably so, God hates.

Judges is the story of how the people of Israel rebel against God, are punished by God and their own actions, turn back to God because God sends a judge to lead them, and how God rescues and restores the nation of Israel. Judges is the story of Israel, which keeps allowing itself to be pulled away from God. Again, it sounds familiar. The story is this repeated cycle six times in Judges. Each time God sends a judge to lead the people of Israel back to God. And I think as we walk through Judges, we will see ourselves. We will see this Old Testament book is not simply a collection of Bible stories of people long ago who faltered and failed. Instead, we will see the story of human people who are loved again and again by the same God who loved the people Israel again and again. Or as one scholar wrote, we will see how much God loves repeat sinners.

Managing Sin vs. Destroying It

Now we read in the first chapter that immediately after the death of Joshua, Israel calls upon the Lord and asks for help as it was instructed to do so. The campaign and the battle proceeds as God said it would. God says, "I hereby give the land into his hand, the hand of Judah." The Israelites defeat 10,000 at Bezek. Then Israel embarks on a slight, ever so slight deviation from God's instruction.

Remember back to Deuteronomy, it says you are to destroy completely. The destruction of the enemy is not for blood. It's not for treasure. It's for setting up the tribes of Israel to be faithful and obedient to God and God alone. The defeated peoples, the Canaanites, were idol worshippers. And if they were gone or destroyed, then there would be no temptation by the Israelites to also worship idols. Now admittedly we have plenty of idols in our world today. We worship money, success, smartphones, cars, greed, and here's one on the horizon: the National Football League. God commands Israel to destroy completely the source of sin.

Still, Israel ever so slightly deviates from God's plan. For one of the kings they defeat, the king of Bezek, he flees the battle and the Israelites catch up with him and they capture him. Now Bezek, he takes great pride that he had caught and punished 70 other kings. And the way that he punishes them is by amputating their thumbs and big toes. For it is very difficult to hold a spear or a sword or a weapon if you don't have a thumb. At my house, we like to say that if our dog had opposable thumbs, she wouldn't need us. Also, if you don't have a big toe, you don't have any balance. You can't run. You can't attack. You can't run to the enemy, can't run from the enemy. So Bezek, that's how he punishes his foes. That was a Canaanite way of defeating or punishing the enemy. He doesn't kill or destroy them. He maims them.

And so, Israel adopts this same Canaanite practice. They walk away from what God commands them, and instead, in the very first chapter, they're getting in line with what their enemy does to their enemies. They did what the Canaanites did to each other instead of what God commands. This subtle deviation from God's direction and will was Israel already rebelling against God. For Israel attempts to manage the sin—the sin of idol worshiping—by maiming the king instead of destroying him and the sin of idol worship. Israel manages the sin with its own ideas and plan. And I think we know how that usually goes. We know how it goes when we attempt to manage sin instead of turning completely from it. The sin controls us instead of us controlling the sin. We think we can control it, but we know better. And we're reminded that Paul in Romans said, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Israel tried to be dead mostly to sin, mostly to idol worship and the influence of the enemy. But it's God who commands us to be dead to all of the sin so that we can be alive fully to God in Christ.

The Greatest Commandment and the Hebrew Roots

Now during Jesus's ministry, he was asked by the Pharisees and the Sadducees, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now Jesus responds by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your mind." Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4. Now the Israelites—the same Israelites who are trying to manage their sin or deviate from God's direction—are very, very familiar with this verse. It comes from the same Deuteronomy that commands them to destroy their enemies. For God commands the Israelites and God commands us to love God with all and not just some. When we try to manage sin and have a little of both, we usually get what we expect.

Now Jesus answers the question further about the greatest commandment. He goes further off a second commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Now the Hebrew word for love is *ahava* and it refers to affection or care. Love that a parent has for a child. Love that a sister has for a brother. Love that a leader has for their people. It's not

physical attraction love. We may even say God's love is—it is action. It's not passive. It's not sit around. It's not maybe do something. God's love, or ahava, is doing, acting, responding, showing, demonstrating, and being. It is showing God's love in return by how I treat you. We are to actively love the Lord your God. For loving God is like a force of nature. We love like a waterfall, a mountain, like plate tectonics. We love effortlessly.

Now Jesus, when he quotes Deuteronomy, says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." The Hebrew word for heart is lev. Now biblical Hebrew doesn't have a specific word for brain. So lev encompasses the intellectual life. It's about thinking, making sense, feeling, experiencing fear, experiencing joy, affection—the center of everything. When we listen and receive the commandment to love God with our heart, it's not just an emotional love. It is also a thinking love. Can we also say that when we love God, love neighbor, and love self with all of our heart, that love is wise? It's strategic and thoughtful. That love is bold.

Now, love your God, your Lord God with all your soul, or nephesh in Hebrew. The soul is the whole person, the whole existence, the whole being, your whole physical existence, every fiber, every cell, every action, every deed. We love God with our today and our tomorrow. We love God with our physical, spiritual, mental, and social actions. For nothing is outside the scope of our love for God and thus our neighbor and our self. Why would we want to love God with anything less? Why would we love our child, our parent, our spouse, our best friend, those people under our care, with anything less than the whole self? I know you want to sing the song. It's like you put your whole self in the Hokey Pokey, right?

For we are commanded by God—the same God who commanded the Israelites—to love God with all our mind, as is sometimes translated, with all of our strength. The Hebrew word we find in the Shema, or these special words from Deuteronomy, is me'od, and it's almost never translated or used for strength. Instead, it is an adverb more closely translated as very, much, or really. Love your Lord your God with all your very, with all your much, with all your really. It is commanding us to devote every possibility or opportunity and capacity to honoring God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

And we understand that in order to love our neighbor, we must first love God. And we can't love our neighbor with everything we have, everything we are, and our whole self if we don't love God the same. And we can't love God completely if we still place those idols, those other things, between ourselves and that full and complete relationship with God.

Loving Self and Neighbor

That second commandment that Jesus gives after the greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourself. Of course, loving yourself is not as easy as it sounds. Amazon

Prime is not the path to loving yourself. Ignoring your own health needs is not the path to loving yourself. Working yourself to exhaustion is not how we love ourselves. Telling people you don't want to be a burden is not the path to loving yourself. In fact, I'm pretty sure Jesus has already said, "Come to me all ye who are carrying heavy burdens." Jesus loves the burdens that we bring to Jesus.

I really do believe that God does call us to love our neighbor. For the most part, we do that very well. We don't do so out of pride, looking for accomplishment. We do so because we love God. That greatest commandment—love God—demands the greatest conversations, demands prayers and efforts. And we know doing the greatest thing is never the easiest. Following the greatest commandment deserves our greatest effort. For God first gives us the greatest love and then commands us to reflect and shine the same love on our neighbors, on the creation.

We need to only ask: Am I loving God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my mind? It's not a test. It's not an if-then relationship. It is what we get to do as followers of Jesus Christ. It is what we get to do when we follow as God commanded. And absolutely we are going to rebel. We are going to falter. We are going to even fail. But God loves us again and again and again. God loves a repeat sinner.

Loving God, loving self, loving neighbor is what we are commanded to do. Loving is action; it's doing, it's living, it's being. So with courage, with hope, with boldness, and with the grace that God gives and gives and gives, we will love the Lord our God. We will love our neighbor, and we will love ourselves.

And thanks be to God for that.

Amen.