



Roanoke, Virginia  
September 2, 2018

## ***“Leading Leaders”***

*Exodus 18:13-27*

**George C. Anderson**

In Mississippi, I was asked to coach a girls’ soccer team. This team was unusual in that its roster contained the daughters of five soccer coaches who were working with other teams or taking a break that year.

- That was the year of my greatest success as a soccer coach.  
We won the state championship.
- That was the year of my greatest misery as a soccer coach.  
Coaching the girls was fun. Coaching coaches was not.

I had to call a parents’ meeting to make it clear that there was only one coach of that team and for better or for worse, I was it.

For the sake of efficiency, sometimes it needs to be clear that there is only one leader and everyone else is to follow. Imagine a US senator, a middle school teacher whose students actually behave, a CEO of a large company, and let’s throw in a Head of Staff of a large church- all leaders and each handed a paddle and a life jacket. By coincidence, they all signed up for the same rafting trip on the Salmon River in California. They are greeted by their 20-year-old guide, Stephanie, whose nickname, “Osprey,” matches both the birds they will see on the river and the tattoo on her right shoulder. On the trip, in approaching Class V rapids, that raft does not have five leaders. It has one. And call her “Osprey.”

Yes, there are times when there is only one voice to be heard, only one authority to be obeyed, only one leader to follow. The moment calls for it. In scripture, there are times when the sole authority of the prophet, or judge, or king is to be obeyed.



But, though there are those moments, the overall message of scripture is not the message I had for those soccer parents that day. The great leaders of scripture do not simply demand that others follow. They equip others to lead with them.

Our passage is an example. It is a passage we often overlook, but in the whole story of Moses' life, it is a turning point. It also gives a strong scriptural hint as to why democracy eventually emerged in countries strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Before this turning point, Moses was in one of those situations where he felt the entire burden of leadership on his shoulders. He didn't want that burden and said so at the burning bush. God gave it to him anyway. God said he would be with him, and that brother Aaron would help, but it was Moses who had to go stand before the mighty Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go." It was Moses who had to lead the slaves from their hovels at night, through the waters with the Egyptians in pursuit, in the wilderness where bread and water was a daily concern and where there were sometimes hostile tribes.

The Israelites were not capable of leading themselves, after all. We have seen in history over and over again that when dictators are overthrown, liberation doesn't necessarily mean freedom. We have seen it in Africa, Central America and the Middle East. These Israelites that Moses is leading might now be free of physical bondage, but they still think and act like slaves... which is to say, think and act as they are told to think and act. Having depended on one dictator to guide them, a Pharaoh who expected to be worshipped and obeyed as a god, they now look to Moses and can't help but hope he is a god too.

And Moses feels those expectations. They weigh on him, and he tries to meet them. He spends long hours as the sole judge and mediator of his people's concerns and disputes.

Jethro, his father-in-law, watches him one day and grows concerned. Here's what happens:

<sup>13</sup> The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. <sup>14</sup> When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" <sup>15</sup> Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. <sup>16</sup> When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." <sup>17</sup> Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup> You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. <sup>19</sup> Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; <sup>20</sup> teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. <sup>21</sup> You should also look for able men among



all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. <sup>22</sup> Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.”

<sup>24</sup> So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. <sup>25</sup> Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. <sup>26</sup> And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. <sup>27</sup> Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country.

There is an obvious, surface message here that in our culture that speaks so much of self-care and well-being, we can't miss. We can't miss it especially on Labor Day weekend. Moses is over-functioning and Jethro says, “What you are doing is not good.” Rabbi Sacks points out that only two times is the entire Torah do we hear the words *lo tov*, which means, “not good.” God says to Adam, “You cannot live alone.” Jethro says to Moses, “You cannot lead alone.” Then Jethro tells Moses how to do it, “Share and delegate! Appoint yourself over a few, appoint them over others, and then appoint them over others.”

And why? “Because if you don't,” Jethro says, “you will burn out.” Of course, Jethro would not have used the term “burn out.” The phrase was used in the title of a 1961 Graham Greene novel but didn't become a popular catchphrase until after Herbert Freudenberger used it in a 1974 paper describing the health risks of overwhelming occupational stress. Now, “burn out” is used so much that if any term can be said to suffer burn out, it might be the term “burn out.”

But overused or not, let's not miss the truth of it. Work is a virtue, but so is rest... so much so that it is commanded by God. If Jethro is speaking to you today and you leave here more resolved to balance work and rest for your own mental, physical and emotional health; and if you leave with a resolve to better delegate and share responsibilities, then you will have gained something from this sermon.

You would have gained something, but not all that I hope you gain.

We had a baptism earlier. Imagine me giving this charge to the parents, Whitney and Nick Tiemeyer, instead of the one I gave:

Whitney and Nick, raising a child is a lot of work. Right now, she has to be clothed, fed, cleaned, and changed. She might wake up at nights. And she's not going to learn anything without someone to teach her. If you try to do it all yourself, you're going to



burn out. Call on your family. Trade off with other parents. Leave her with sitters at home or at daycare. You can't do it all. Take care of yourself.

Good advice, right? It's Jethro's advice. And yet, it fell flat, didn't it? It misses the point. The focus is on the self-care of the parents and not on the spiritual health of the child. Parents have a tremendous influence in their children's lives. In some sense, they are leaders. Isn't their calling at baptism to raise a child so that the child has a chance to make her or his own profession of faith and be an influence in others' lives? Should not the charge be to raise Hadley to know who she is in God's eyes, to claim that identity as God's own, and to grow into the calling of living out her baptism in a way that, with God's grace, will bring some of heaven's dignity and light into this world? Of course, the parents can't do it alone and that's why the congregation also makes vows to help them, and why God has vowed to be with them. But that baby is as helpless as a slave and needs to be nurtured to freedom and responsibility.

It is amazing to me that ministers, who should understand this about baptism, so often forget it when it comes time to give a charge to a minister being installed or ordained. Ed McLeod and I have been keeping a count for over 20 years (He's my minister friend in Raleigh). We both attend a lot of services where ministers are either ordained for ministry or installed in a church as a minister. We keep hearing the same charge being made to the pastor. It goes something like this:

Ministry is hard, and you're going to be overwhelmed by all the responsibilities. There is no end to what you can do to respond to the needs of the church and its members. Take care of yourself. Take your day off. Remember to spend time with your family and friends who are out of the church. Maintain healthy boundaries so that you won't burn out.

Good Jethro advice, right? It is something I have needed to hear over the course of my ministry. As recently as seven years ago, Elizabeth Link, one of our Associate Pastors, kept seeing me come in to the church to work some on Mondays, my day off. She finally said to me one day: "You're not setting a good example for me in ministry when you do that."

Good line. And it worked. I won't fib and say I never work on Mondays because I sometimes do. But not most Mondays. And hardly ever at church where Elizabeth and Rachel can see me.

So, yes, good advice. Is that really the right charge for ministers about to embark on the great adventure of ordained ministry in the church, or who are about to begin a chapter of ministry at a specific church? Shouldn't ministers be charged to lead others to Jesus and the cause of the Gospel; to proclaim with all the power and eloquence that can be mustered the good news of God's love to the world needing to hear it? And shouldn't they be charged



to raise up other leaders within the church because they cannot do it on their own but will need the help of others and of God?

We did something about that during the Announcement period. We elected the next slate of elders to serve on the church session- the church's governing board. Serving on the session is not like serving on so many other non-profit boards where members are expected to raise money and officially sign off on the decisions of the staff. No, they will be expected to bear the responsibilities and do the work of shared ministry with Rev. Link, Rev. Thompson and myself.

I don't want to scare the eight who were elected, but the old Southern *Book of Church Order* took "shared ministry" so seriously it said that elders needed to be prepared to preach if the minister is sick. An elder in my father-in-law's church took that to heart and never went anywhere without a sermon in his pocket or suitcase.

I am fairly certain that none of the elders we just elected will be asked to preach on a moment's notice. But I do know that they will be expected to lead this congregation in every aspect of ministry; missions, education, worship, fellowship.

Let's go back to our passage. Yes, on the surface level, Jethro's focus is on his son-in-law. He doesn't want Moses to wear out. But the theologians who put the Hebrew Scriptures together put this story in because they had something much more important to say about following God. And what they have to say has to do with baptism, with ministry in the church, AND with every single Christian who is called to follow Jesus.

Their overarching charge of scripture to every Jew and Christian is not to pursue a spirituality for their personal wellbeing- their mental, physical, social or financial health. I know that's the message of many churches, particularly churches that preach a prosperity Gospel, but it is not the message of scripture.

Of course we are to take care of ourselves, but so that we can do what?

Short of being utterly incapacitated, all of us have some measure of influence on others. Influence is leadership, even at the smallest level. The question is what kind of influence are you going to have... as a worker or boss, as a friend, as a parent, as a citizen, as someone with any responsibility formal or informal? Will your leadership come of the ignorance of slaves or come as those who have been equipped to lead in a moral and ethical way?

True leadership in God's eyes, you see, is *morally bound*. The slaves in the wilderness were given the commandments to guide them. Kings in Israel were given prophets who reminded the kings of their limits of power and their moral responsibility to serve the people first and not themselves. The disciples were given Jesus' teachings. And the early church was given the moral guidance of the Epistles. In every case, God's people were charged to lead; to use whatever influence they had to promote the justice, grace and dignity of God's kingdom in the world.

So, there is a reason we have study and worship opportunities at this church for all ages. Being God's moral agents in this world is a big, scary, wonderful calling. It is nothing



any of us can do on our own, and without prepared heads and hearts, we'll do more harm than good.

So, as a child of God, be not ignorant. Commit to continuing to learn what it means to bear the image of God and follow in the way of Jesus. Then go forth and lead with that light of understanding. Bear the name of Jesus in the way you treat others, the way you speak to others and speak of others, in the way you push against what robs human dignity or abuses God's creation. Lead with the light of faith so that the liberating grace, mercy and peace of God will spread; whether to children being raised, friends being influenced, or through movements within the church or community.

Be Jesus leaders. One of Israel's presidents said that he was the president of missions of presidents. That's nature of the Jewish people, and the nature of the Church. Be God's people of moral leaders.

