

Exodus 18:13-37; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

“What’s Going On Here?”

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Introduction to Exodus 18:13-37

The people of Israel have escaped from the Egyptians. Thru Moses, God has led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. Now they are waiting for God to determine that they can enter into Canaan. So they’ve been freed from the oppression, but because they’ve been waiting in the wilderness 40 years they need some organizational structures. Remember, the Israelites numbered in the 1000s now. It’s helpful to know for our story this morning that Moses’ wife, Zipporah had been living back home with her father, Jethro. Jethro has just brought Zipporah and Moses’ sons to Moses. While Jethro is there he makes some observations regarding Moses’ leadership style.

Message

I remember the night. It was hot in the kitchen—too hot. The steam from the macaroni –soon to be mac n cheese steamed up my glasses. I wasn’t ready and the youth group dinner was starting in less than an hour. The theme “Dress Up, Dress Down” Dinner meant that you were supposed to get dressed up for half of your body and grunge out for the other half. So the students would show up in ratty jeans and a shirt and tie or an old t-shirt and nice skirt or whatever. It also meant that some of the food was gourmet and some was pretty plain—like Kraft mac ‘n’ cheese. I had just begun as the associate pastor and so I thought that I needed to do this dinner—for 40 youth and adults—by myself. It was a disaster. The pasta stuck together. I burnt the hors’doeuvres. Thankfully, someone on the youth commission took me aside and explained that I needed to let other people help. It took me years to really understand team leadership. I finally began to realize that when I tried to do everything I was actually taking away an opportunity for others to use their gifts—to serve—to have a ministry as well. I

also realized that when everything depended on just 1 person there was a greater chance for failure. I call this lone ranger leadership and the result is black hors'doeuvres and sticky pasta. We are a society that values independence over inter-dependence. But that is not God's model.

Similarly, Moses was a bad administrator. He also tried to do everything on his own. The scripture says that he worked from morning to evening trying to hear everybody and fix everybody's problems. Trying to be everything to everyone. Jethro was right when he said, "This is no way to go about it. You'll burn out and the people right along with you." Burn-out—have you ever heard of it? It affects you and all those around you including your family. I wonder why Moses didn't have his wife and children living with him. Perhaps he was too consumed with leading the People of God. Rest, relaxation, and family time are crucial. I'm glad that Pastor Ken is on an extended vacation with his wife Nadine. We need time for self-care and for our family.

Burn-out is not restricted to clergy. How often have you felt exhausted—like you've taken on too many things? You've said "yes" too many times? In churches it's called the 80/20 principle—where 20% of the people do 80% of the ministry. Even in a large church like Hamblen—there is a group of folks that are involved in most of the work and leadership. In God's model everyone is using their gifts. Leadership and the ministry is spread out—not just the pastors or certain folks that "do everything." But to make this possible some structure for team leadership is important.

Andrew Carlsson tells the story of a group of Christians who decided to start a new church. They were offered the use of a small barn on land belonging to one person in the group. They renovated the space and began to gather for worship on Sundays. They decided not to have leaders, and they certainly did not want any committees. This lasted for a few months, and then chaos, confusion,

arguments, power plays, hurt feelings, and a host of other issues began to develop. The church, like any human organization, needs structure and process.

Writer Warren Schulz notes how Jethro, as an outsider had the ability to come in, observe and see things perhaps more objectively than an insider. Someone from the outside brought a new idea. He was alert to the needs of the community. He saw that the community of faith was acting like a small—pastor-centered congregation. The Israelites liked having their pastor available for them at any hour. They liked him knowing all of their problems and concerns. But it wasn't working. Everyone was exhausted. Moses was depleted. The people were standing in the hot sun all day.

It reminds me of going to an amusement park like Silverwood one summer. We were standing in the queue waiting for a ride. They had us going down, turning, going back. I felt like I was cattle being corralled. We would pass by people, smile and nod, and then you passed by them again. The line stopped moving, then it started again. I would tap my son or my husband to move—I wanted to keep moving. We waited our turn, waited and waited and finally we made it to the end and we went into the next area and realized that the line goes back and forth in there and we had a long time until it was really our turn.

And so it was 3000 years ago, the people waited in the sun in line for their turn. And I'm sure they got a bit cranky waiting. So along comes Jethro. And he says to Moses, "This is not good." Jethro knows that Moses's style allows for no weakness or failure. It's unrealistic. Jethro suggests some improvement then he moved on to other things. A new structure emerged, one that was better suited for the future mission of God's people—one that is inter-related. Jethro offers a new organizational plan for ministry. Instead of everything going to Moses—he has de-centralized the leadership. This structure allows for leaders to have authority at various levels.

Now Moses' energies are to be largely devoted elsewhere. Moses can answer God's call to represent the whole community. Moses is called to lead—to cast a vision. He can now bring concerns to God & discern God's will for the people. Moses second task is to teach--to educate them on God's instruction and guide them in the way to go. The specific cases Moses was to delegate to others. In this way the people helped bear the burden. If he shared the ministry in this way, Jethro says, Moses will have the strength to carry out whatever God commands. Team leadership reduces burn-out.

Burn-out takes its toll—especially on families. Glenn McDonald, pastor of Zionsville Pres. Church in Indianapolis shared a story about the cost of burn-out on his marriage. He confessed that he was a recovering workaholic. He actually hid stashes of work around the house and would sneak time for work when he was supposed to be home spending time with his family. As the organizing pastor of a new church Glenn thought that everything depended on him so he worked 24/7. One night he was home searching for a stash of work and he got into a heated argument with his wife. Glenn recalls yelling up to her at the top of the stairs, "What happened to the beautiful girl that I married?" She bitterly said, "Oh, she died, but you were too busy to notice." Wow, this moved him deeply. Glenn repented and through a period of transformation came to a new understanding of leadership.

Moses went through a similar change. Moses listened and followed Jethro's advice and because of that Moses could endure and the people would have peace. Win-win. People flourish too! Remember, no more long lines! Moses was told that he needs to be looking for leaders--searching out potential leaders. Asking folks to step up is part of his job. Now remember that when Joe calls you about the Children's ministry! Who are these other leaders? Moses should keep a sharp look out for people who: fear God, are trustworthy, & have integrity.

In many ways Hamblen is at a similar place as the people of Israel. We're not just looking for a new associate pastor. We're asking questions like: What are the gifts of the people? What is our vision for ministry? Who is God calling into lay leadership?

When I came back to Spokane after being gone 15 years, I was surprised at the transformation that has taken place at Hamblen Park. When I left it was a small church and you had just hired your first associate pastor who was part-time. Through Ken, Robin and the session's leadership you have grown beyond a medium to a large church with a full-time associate and many full-time program staff folks. It's encouraging and wonderful to see the many ministries and all the people worshiping God together. Now with the interim comes the opportunity to look at the leadership organization. The session has been looking at the staff design—which of the staff relate to which committee and what are the working relationships.

With a larger church and all the ministries the need is even greater for empowering the laity—having others come alongside Moses to minister to the people. How will you respond to these changes in the leadership style? Will you embrace the leadership from your brothers and sisters or insist on only Moses hearing your concerns and teaching you the way of God? Will you receive the care from lay folks or demand that a pastor visit you when you're sick? Will the lay leaders be given the authority to make decisions and will you respect them and those decisions? If you're in leadership you might be called to step down and share the leadership with others just as Moses did. If you're not in leadership you might be called to step up. All of us are called to receive and embrace the new leaders.

Moses was still busy but his role changed. John Westfall wrote a helpful book, "Let Go" which looks at effective leadership in ministry. He asks the question,

“Is my job to build a strong ministry or is it to build strong people who minister?” We want to empower the laity for ministry here. In October we’re offering a Christian leadership class. This winter there’ll be an opportunity for you to discover your gifts for ministry. I was at an interim training earlier this month where a presenter said that “A sign of health in a church is the degree to which the church supports the whole enterprise of calling, training and supporting its’ new lay leadership.” We want to equip folks to be able to share leadership.

In closing I want us to look at our passage from the New Testament that Judith read. Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth provides a good framing for our understanding of Christian leadership. Arguments were brewing relating to connections with leaders in the church. Paul’s letter urges the people to remember their first love—their primary loyalty was to Christ.

“I’m on Paul’s side,” or “I’m for Apollos,” or “Peter is my man,” could be translated, “I’m from Harland’s time,” or “I follow Ken,” or “I belong to Robin’s group.” Let me be clear—I have not observed divisiveness in this body of Christ called Hamblen. I do know though that there are strong bonds of love with the pastors and former pastors. Sacramental acts bind us to each other—but our priority is that we are bound to Christ. I also know that none of these leaders have sought to collect a following for themselves but focused their ministries on pointing folks to Christ. Whether we are talking about pastoral or lay leadership—Christ is the head of the church.

With this framework of Christ’s Lordship in mind, the question still remains, will we seek, encourage, and fully embrace the ministry of those who have been called to leadership but are not ordained pastors. Hamblen has grown into a large church—but it was a slow stable growth over 15 years. I’m not sure that the new associate pastor will ever know as many people as well as Robin did and Ken does. Jethro’s model of shared leadership works for larger churches. It is

wisdom from 3000 years ago that is effective for ministering to God's people today. As the scripture reveals, "If you handle the work this way, you'll have the strength to carry out whatever God commands you, and the people in their settings will flourish also."

Amen.

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