

Good Leaders Don't Just Happen

Cycle # 1 – Session #6

Good Leaders Don't Just Happen

Text: Exodus 18

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle – In lighting this candle we are minded of God's presence among us as we gather in this place. May it also remind us that the light is within us to be carried wherever we are. As the light is given to us, we give it to others.

Song: Be Thou My Vision -- #595 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

Gracious God, we give thanks for men and women whose faithful witness to your love inspires your people generation after generation.

We remember the Hebrew people who in all the years of their slavery passed on the memories of their ancestors who had known God and believed they would be blessed with a land.

All the midwives who refused to kill the Hebrew babies and the women who protected their children so that as a people they continued to grow and thrive even in the harshness of slavery.

Moses who had been preparing since birth and who responding with courage when you called, carried your name and your message to the Pharaoh and leading his people to freedom.

Jethro who offered a timely word of praise and advice so that Moses was not worn out by trying to do the impossible and new leaders began to arise.

For all those in our own lives who have taught us of God's love, spoke up when we needed a word of kindness or wisdom, who opened the way for new leaders to grow and showed them the way. Amen

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another places where you have seen or provided effective leadership this week. Broaden your definition of leadership by considering persons who have opened the way for others and helped them be more effective in their work or the studies or relationships. Everyone leads somewhere.

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Scripture

Exodus 18

¹⁻⁴ Jethro, priest of Midian and father-in-law to Moses, heard the report of all that God had done for Moses and Israel his people, the news that God had delivered Israel from Egypt. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken in Zipporah, Moses' wife who had been sent back home, and her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (Sojourner) for he had said, "I'm a sojourner in a foreign land"; the name of the other was Eliezer (God's-Help) because "The God of my father is my help and saved me from death by Pharaoh."

⁵⁻⁶ Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses his sons and his wife there in the wilderness where he was camped at the mountain of God. He had sent a message ahead to Moses: "I, your father-in-law, am coming to you with your wife and two sons."

⁷⁻⁸ Moses went out to welcome his father-in-law. He bowed to him and kissed him. Each asked the other how things had been with him. Then they went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law the story of all that God had done to Pharaoh and Egypt in helping Israel, all the trouble they had experienced on the journey, and how God had delivered them.

⁹⁻¹¹ Jethro was delighted in all the good that God had done for Israel in delivering them from Egyptian oppression. Jethro said, "Blessed be God who has delivered you from the power of Egypt and Pharaoh, who has delivered his people from the oppression of Egypt. Now I know that God is greater than all gods because he's done this to all those who treated Israel arrogantly."

¹² Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a Whole-Burnt-Offering and sacrifices to God. And Aaron, along with all the elders of Israel, came and ate the meal with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

¹³⁻¹⁴ The next day Moses took his place to judge the people. People were standing before him all day long, from morning to night. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What's going on here? Why are you doing all this, and all by yourself, letting everybody line up before you from morning to night?"

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me with questions about God. When something comes up, they come to me. I judge between a man and his neighbor and teach them God's laws and instructions."

¹⁷⁻²³ Moses' father-in-law said, "This is no way to go about it. You'll burn out, and the people right along with you. This is way too much for you—you can't do this alone. Now listen to me. Let me tell you how to do this so that God will be in this with you. Be there for the people before God, but let the matters of concern be presented to God. Your job is to teach them the rules and instructions, to show them how to live, what to do. And then you need to keep a sharp eye out for competent men—men who fear God, men of integrity, men who are incorruptible—and appoint them as leaders over groups organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. They'll be responsible for the everyday work of judging among the people. They'll bring the hard cases to you, but in the routine cases they'll be the judges. They will share your load and that will make it easier for you. 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."

²⁴⁻²⁷ Moses listened to the counsel of his father-in-law and did everything he said. Moses picked competent men from all Israel and set them as leaders over the people who were organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. They took over the everyday work of judging among the people. They brought the hard cases to Moses, but in the routine cases they were the judges. Then Moses said good-bye to his father-in-law who went home to his own country.

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading – Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading – Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

Most biblical stories are like snapshots in the family album. A single moment is suspended in time. You don't see what went on just before or even just after nor do you see their larger context. One way to get behind the text is the practice of Midrash, what a Jewish friend described, as filling out the picture, letting you see what could have happened. It is also something in keeping with what you're told in the story and how people act. A Midrash for this lesson is at the end of the session to be read or used however you choose.

In some ways this story seems a little odd or at least it seems to be in an odd place. It is as though just yesterday the Israelites were new to the nomadic life of the desert, complaining about their living conditions and today they are behaving like a semi settled community. Some order has emerged and they've been together long enough to need a mediator and judge.

This is one of those stories which seem to carry with it more questions than answers and it doesn't always hang together. For example when and how did Moses send his wife back to her father's house? The last time she was mentioned, Moses had taken her and their sons to Egypt with him. Now his father-in-law announces he's bringing her back, but when they get there she's hardly mentioned and quickly disappears. In another passage it sounds as though Jethro learned about God at Sinai after the giving of the commandments and here Jethro shows up, having heard about the mighty acts of God, when Sinai is still some distance in the future. This may be the result of several people having put various traditions together, kind of like creating a patchwork quilt. The result is quite beautiful and even intriguing, but getting the pieces to fit exactly doesn't always work. So chances are we're seeing the hand of an editor or several editors in the telling of the story.

Even though Zipporah seems to disappear from the account, a midrash from the Talmud says "*with creative remembrance*" when Moses was having trouble getting the people to obey the laws, he turned to the women because he said, '*Adam would never have sinned, if God had only given Eve the directions instead of Adam,*' perhaps showing how much Moses had learned from Zipporah of the wisdom and tact of women." (NIB, Vol I, pp. 963) That may not be the case, but I like to think that great leaders recognize the wisdom God has given both men and women and that when they work together God's truth is made clearer and the whole becomes richer.

Another of the unanswered questions is about Jethro. Who was he other than Moses' father-in-law. He's called "a" or "the priest of Midian," but there is no clear indication

about what that means. One commentator suggests three possibilities: a) He was a priest of the gods of Midian and throwing a feast was an act of courtesy, religious tolerance, and kinship or b) Jethro was already a convert to Yahweh and had been ordained as a priest in the worship of Yahweh. *One ancient legend says God was so joyful over Jethro's conversion when he approached the altar manna began to fall all around him as a blessing from heaven* or c) Jethro had always been a priest of Yahweh in Midian and he was in fact coming now to instruct Moses on the correct way of offering a sacrifice and how to arrange judicial affairs. It's possible Yahweh, although his name was not yet known, was already understood to be God of this particular district, particularly the Mountain of Sinai and that Moses had first begun to learn about Yahweh in his father-in-law's home, so the revelation of Yahweh to Moses in the burning bush, while amazing, wasn't the revelation of an entirely unknown God. (NIB, Vol 1, p 964)

The commentator suggests that Moses found himself when he stood up for his oppressed brothers, discovered love when he met Zipporah and found God in conversation with a good man and in meditation during the many hours alone with the flocks. The God he found was not some distant God, but one who dwelt where he lived and he saw God in his family, in conversation with his father-in-law, in the wilderness he came to know intimately. (NIB, VI, p. 965) While there is no way of proving this to have been the case, I like the idea that Moses had been becoming acquainted with God during his years in Midian. While transformation sometimes appears to happen in an instant as when Moses encountered Yahweh in the burning bush, there is usually a lot which has gone on before that sudden encounter with God. There may have been dozens of events that led to that moment in the wilderness.

Observation

The story appears to be about several things which are important to our own transformation journeys. First, this is a story of witness and response. Moses tells the story and the faith is transmitted from Moses to Jethro. Whether or not Jethro knew at least something of Yahweh before this time, he discovers in this account Yahweh is above all other gods. Jethro's response is one of doxology – praise of God, a celebration, a feast and worship.

Consider

Where do you experience the Good News of God, in your life, in your congregation? Do you tell it to anyone? Do you celebrate?

Observation

We live in a culture which understands idols to be gods made of wood and stone. Living in India I learned that many people there also recognize idols as wood and stone and know they are not God. They are seen as lifting up some facet of God. It is that to which they seek to show reverence. One of my favorite festivals was that of Ganesh, the elephant god whose attribute is wisdom. Before the festival the sculptors went down to the river and collected mud which they used to create the community statue. It

was painted in brilliant tropical colors. A great festival was held. When it was over the statue was returned to the river. "Other gods" does not necessarily mean idols of wood or stone.

Consider

What are the gods people worship in our culture? What are the 10 most important things to you? What receives most of your energy, time, money, talent? Is God stronger than money or position or ambition or personal power? If so, what is the good news you have to tell?

Observation

The conversation between Jethro and Moses in the early part of this chapter offers a model for telling the acts of God. Moses begins by reciting what God had done for the Israelites, how God had been with them in hardship, delivered them and cared for them. This story will be told and retold many many times through the scriptures always reminding the people that this story is their story and shapes who they are. The appropriate response is worship in the gathered community.

Consider

Where and how do you tell your story? Where and how is the story of God's action in your life, in your church, in the world told? What connects you to the bigger story? What do you offer to God in worship?

Observation

In this account of Jethro and Moses there is a sudden shift in the story after the feast and the worship. The next morning Jethro goes out to see the community in action. Perhaps because of his own experience as the leader of a community and the head of a family he recognizes that there is going to be trouble ahead if Moses doesn't change what he's doing. This brings us to the role of leaders in the transformation process. Every leader needs a Jethro.

Lesson #1 If Moses continues to work so hard trying to cover every detail and disagreement in the community he will be exhausted. If he becomes exhausted he will become less effective as a leader and be stranded doing things that are less important. If that happens, the community will cease to function very effectively.

Lesson #2 Be clear about what it is you are to do and do that to the best of your ability. In Moses' case he was to be the teacher, the carrier of the vision, charged with the responsibility of leading these people on the path God was placing before them.

Lesson #3 Understand you are not the only one who can lead. Many people have leadership abilities if those abilities are nurtured and encouraged. While

some people can lead thousands, others can lead hundreds or tens. Learning leadership skills is best done by beginning to do.

Lesson #4 If Moses is willing to work himself to death, his family will pay as well as the community. But he is the one who has to set the limits and learn to work smarter.

Lesson #5 Look to the geese. Geese fly in a formation which makes their flying most effective and uses the least energy. When the lead goose becomes tired he or she is allowed to drop back and rest on the wind behind the others and another leader moves to the front. In this way geese are able to fly thousands of miles without dropping in exhaustion.

Consider

If your congregation has a pastor or you are the pastor, what are the expectations for this person or for yourself? Is Sabbath a part of the expectation? How many evenings a week is the pastor expected to be at meetings? How does the church function? Are your leaders burned out? Are they expected to take a job and do it until they no longer can? Are new people brought gradually into leadership? How many jobs are people expected to do? Are there people who do everything? Are there people who are never asked to do anything? Is there a system for mentoring young leaders?

Observation

Moses was smart. He listened to his father-in-law and did as he suggested. The result was Moses was able to lead for 40 years and guide the people not only through the wilderness, but in their deepening understanding of God. At the same time other leaders began to develop so that when Moses died there were others to lead the way forward.

Consider

Are new leaders welcomed into leadership in your congregation? When one leader leaves will there be others to step in?

Activity (Optional)

As a group create a list of the ten most important qualifications for a leader to have. Come to consensus on those and write a want ad for leaders. You may have specific jobs in mind or you may see a variety of places where leaders are needed.

Supplies – a package of post it notes for people to write the qualifications on and a flip chart/markers or writing materials for the want ad.

Practicing the Presence

- 1) Through the coming week spend some time considering your particular skills, gifts, abilities, and experiences. Offer these to God. Even if they seem very small and minor, they are needed. Who are the people with whom you spend time? One of the key elements in leadership is inviting others to use their gifts, abilities, experiences and talents, so even if you never hold an office or are in a place of public leadership, you have the opportunity to lead in the way you relate to people around you. Look for ways to affirm another person's gifts this week and give thanks for that person.
- 2) The scripture focus for this week is Deuteronomy 8, 10:12-22

Jethro's Story (a Midrash)

A Midrash takes a biblical story and puts in some of the details from behind the scene. It isn't exactly as told in scripture, but has some elements of "what may have been" based on human nature and the way things come about in the every day world. This is my version of Jethro's visit to Moses interspersed with some quotes from the Bible and a brief review of the history of Moses' connection to Jethro. (Norma Roberts)

You will remember we met Jethro when Moses who had run away from Egypt to Midian helped Jethro's seven lovely daughters deal with a bunch of bullies and watered their father's flocks. His actions led to his being invited to dinner. Obviously Jethro who happened to be the priest of Midian and a man of some wealth recognized Moses' possibilities when he heard about him. Not only was Moses invited to dinner, he was invited to marry Jethro's oldest daughter, Zipporah. After their marriage they had children and Moses became the keeper of Jethro's flocks which is how he happened to be in wilderness where he encountered the burning bush.

As you know sometime after that account Moses went back to Egypt and the rest is history. What you may not have thought about was what happened to Zipporah? Moses took her with him when he set out for Egypt, but sometime later when things became really difficult and he was trying to get the Hebrews out, he sent his family back to stay with Jethro.

Months rolled by. Occasionally news of events in Egypt and then the wilderness reached Jethro. He could see his daughter missed Moses and as any grandparent knows, it is fantastic to have grandchildren visit, but there comes a point when they have to go home. Things were kind of slack for Jethro so he packed up Zipporah, the kids, sent word to Moses, and set off for the Israelites' camp. As he got close he sent a messenger ahead so Moses would have a chance to clean up the tent, wash the dishes, make the beds, that kind of thing and be ready for their arrival. That's where our story for this session picks up.

Moses went out to meet his family and welcomed his father-in-law with open arms. No one mentions what Zipporah did, so my guess is she unpacked and fixed dinner while Moses and Jethro sat visiting under a tree. By the time they'd caught up on all the happenings of the past months and Jethro had heard how

the Lord had conquered the Egyptians and the events in the wilderness, it was nearly evening. Jethro was properly amazed and certainly gave Moses his blessing. Later that same evening Jethro, Moses, Moses' brother Aaron, and the elders of Israel gathered around. First there were burnt offerings and sacrifices to God and then there was a feast.

Now we come to the heart of the story. *The next morning Moses sat as a judge for the people. All day he sat there listening to people, solving problems, deciding who was right or wrong in disputes. Jethro spent the day, walking around, talking to people, asking questions and observing what was going on.*

That evening he said to Moses. *“You spend the whole day listening to people and making judgments. This just isn't working. First, you're exhausted and if you keep it up, you'll burn out. Second, if you keep doing this, Zipporah will be unhappy and want go home with me and your children will be running wild. No, this just will not do. Let me tell you how to handle this situation. Your job is to represent the people before God and take their concerns to him. You are also the one who has to teach them about how to live and what it will mean for them to be God's people. That's enough job for anyone. So here's what you're to do ... **keep an eye out for competent men** – men who fear God, men of integrity, men who are incorruptible – and appoint them as leaders over groups organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. Let them take care of the everyday work of judging among the people. They can bring the hardest cases to you, but they can handle routine matters. If you let them share the load it will make it easier for you. Handling the work this way, will give you the strength to carry out whatever God tells you to do. The people will flourish, your wife will be content and your children will be happy”* (Jethro's speech is partly from **The Message Bible** and partly from experience gained by being a leader, a mother, and a grandmother. Good leadership means not having to do it all. NJR)

Jethro stuck around just long enough to see the plan working. Then he bid Moses, Zipporah, and grandchildren farewell and went back to his quiet home in Midian.

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week,

will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Meditation

Spend a few moments in silent reflection considering what it means to lead. Who are the best leaders you know? Where are you a leader?

When you look around you where do you see a need for leadership?

(It may be in your church, your community, your home, your neighborhood. It may be some enormous task or it may be quite simple.)

Leadership does not require you know how to do something, it is more about being willing to learn. Remember Moses got a lot of his training on the job and yet he is remembered for his leadership. If there is such a spot, will you listen carefully to see if you are being called. Sometimes the fact that we notice means God is drawing our attention to this and there may be something we are to do or that we are to help others do.

Write down whatever has come to mind and if you are willing ask the group to hold this “nudging” in prayer with you through the next week or you may simply do what Mary did – ponder it in your own heart for a while.

Reading – (optional)

Christian Leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the Incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance.

Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them.

Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness.

Henri J.M. Nouwen
In the name of Jesus

And/or conclude with the excerpt on leadership from the DVD which accompanies Steven Covey's book, ***The 8th Habit*** (*This is an excellent meditative piece on leadership.*)

Prayer – Notice who is on your right and who is on your left. During the coming week remember these two persons in particular in your prayers. During the week give thanks for all the leaders who have helped shape your life and pray for those who are leaders now and will lead in the future.

(Unison) Dear God, may I be a willing discoverer of the gifts you have placed within me. Teach me to rejoice in the beauty you have planted

**within me. Cleanse the dirt from my inward eyes, so that I might see the
grace showered on all. Help me truly rejoice in the richness of your love.
Amen**

*Keith S. Carlile, Leadership, **Alive Now**, Sept-Oct, 1989*

Blessing – The Strength of God guide us.
The Power of God preserve us,
The Wisdom of God instruct us,
The Spirit of God be within us,
This day and evermore.
As we leave this place we give thanks for your Spirit
which is within us and always out ahead of us.

*Based on a Celtic prayer from the **Celtic Rhythm of life** by David Adams*

Song: (optional) Lo I Am With You – #430 Chalice Hymnal