

Don't Stone the Minister

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Today's story comes from the Old Testament. It is one of many "grumbling stories." These are stories, and there are many of them, where the people who had been slaves in Egypt are wandering around the dessert with Moses as their leader, and they start to grumble. In one earlier story, they grumble about having to eat the manna from heaven and wish that they could return to Egypt where they had cucumbers, leeks, and melons, even if they had been slaves. And in this grumbling story that comes a little later, they are frustrated that there is not enough water to drink. They've been camping for a long time, this motley crew, who by now in the story are called a "congregation." And they are frustrated with their leader Moses, who by now is really their pastor. They've been together for a while, this pastor and this congregation, and they are starting to get on each other's nerves.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

On Seminary Sunday, a day when we try to lift up the vocation of ministry, it is only fitting that we hear a story about a religious leader who is about to be pelted with rocks by his congregation. And by the way, for a while I have wondered if anybody reads that sign outside our church with the weekly sermon title, and I think the answer is No. I mean, I have had a sign outside the church for a week that says, "Please don't throw rocks at the pastor," and not one person has commented on it. Never mind the title, not one person has asked, "Lillian, are you ok or are you having a bad day?" Nothing, so I conclude one of two things, either you don't read the sign, or you saw it and thought, "Ah, the usual public service announcement."

Yes, on the day when we hope that God is stirring someone's heart to join the next generation of leaders for the church, it is only fitting that we hear a story about people who nagged their leader for water, accused him of ruining their lives, and went on to plot physical violence. And if he'd had a church sign, Moses might have needed to hide behind it.

Furthermore, on a Sunday when we pray that God will not just lift up some people,

but that God will lift up the right people to attend seminary, the people of a mature faith, a reasonable spirit, and a balanced ego, it is only fitting that we should hear the story of a religious leader who is so worked up about his own program, so disconnected from his people, so puffed up with arrogant self-righteousness that when criticized, all he can think to say is "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" As if Moses and the Lord were one and nobody had a right to question a thing. No wonder his congregation wanted to stone him. Moses had become obnoxious.

The relationship between the congregation and the pastor is a delicate one, prone to the sinfulness of humanity on both sides of the equation. After all, religious organizations are still, at their root, human organizations. And any organization that admits human beings into its midst is going to have problems. I have often said that if we could just kick all the people out of the church, we could really live up to our ideals. And that includes clergy. Let's face it, we're all human, and therefore we're always going to fall short of the divine calling in some way.

But some times can be worse than others. And this story from Exodus was one of those worse times. The congregation and the pastor were falling short of one another's expectations to such a degree that things had grown unpleasant. And when you read this story from so many thousands of years ago, another country, another people, an entirely foreign culture to our own, that grumbling and those tensions probably sound familiar.

Anyone who has ever been in any kind of leadership knows about some of this. The group begins to grumble, they stew over discontents that can start small and grow larger, and they point their fingers at the leader, wondering why he hasn't fixed it. This could be the church, the PTA, or your last staff meeting.

The leader, in turn, has grown defensive. Because of all that grumbling, he has stopped enjoying talking to his people. And you can understand that too, can't you? If every interaction is a complaint about the water or the food or the tents or the direction...well, you can see why Moses might have pulled back a little and stopped talking to his people. So that when they finally did get his ear and complained about the water shortage that he wasn't able to do anything about, he said, "If you quarrel with me, you're quarreling with the Lord." And in that statement, Moses moved from a defensive posture of leadership to an arrogant posture, and while we may understand how he got there, ultimately neither one of those works.

Now, Moses did have the word of God in his ear. I don't doubt that. But having the word of God in your ear doesn't mean you always get it right. There can be static on the line. And to be a strong and faithful leader, you have to acknowledge this: that you can be in communication with God, but nobody, and I mean nobody, gets a direct line.

But the congregation Moses served also should have been talking to God. As people of faith, we don't believe that only the pastor should talk to God, although there are times when we can act as if we think that. Sometimes religious communities can rely so heavily upon a leader that they become lazy in their own spiritual practices. They treat the pastor as the sort of professional Christian, asking the minister to say the blessing at meals or offer the prayer at the meeting, as if everyone else at the table is incapable of doing so. If a church is committed to building discipleship in all its members, that's a dynamic you don't want to slip into. But I think that's what had happened to the Israelites in the desert. They had fallen off in their own religious

practices, in their own ministries, and were devoting all their energy toward criticizing the ministry of their leader. They were thirsty, and there was no water, and rather than go out looking themselves, they focused on Moses.

In some ways, the Israelites in this story were like six-year-olds playing soccer. You know how six-year-olds play soccer? They all follow the ball around in a big, mad pack. Nobody passes, nobody spreads out, and they just all clump around the ball. Well, human organizations can be like that too. They can all clump around the leadership and fight each other for the ball, criticizing the other members of the clump, in particular the leaders. But meanwhile, there's nowhere for that ball to go because they're stuck in a clump. And that's what had happened to Moses and the people. The people had relinquished their own leadership and discipleship to him and were engaged in a ministry of criticism.

And Moses, his problem was that he had allowed them to relinquish their leadership and discipleship over to him. Out there in the dessert, he had allowed himself to become the go-to guy for everything. Perhaps he even enjoyed that feeling at the beginning, was excited to feel that needed and admired. But as his stature went up, the congregation's responsibility went down, and he was stuck being the answer man for a group that had far too many questions for one person to deal with. Has this ever happened to you when you were working with a group? He was exhausted, run down, even resentful of the people, but he had allowed it to happen. And that was how the courageous leader who led the Israelites across the desert and out of slavery deteriorated into a self-righteous whiner who cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

It's a mess. In writing on leadership, the author Ronald Heifetz distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive problems. A technical problem is a problem with a clear and simple solution. For example, a strep throat is generally a technical problem. There is a medication you can take that usually will take care of it. But a heart condition is more of an adaptive problem. There are no easy answers. You may do surgery, you may do medication, but you'll also be looking at diet and exercise. An adaptive problem does not have a simple answer in that it may involve changing any number of things, perhaps your whole way of life.

So there are technical problems with simpler solutions and adaptive problems that are more complex. In this book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz says that organizations get in the most trouble when they mistake an adaptive problem for a technical problem. They try to solve a complex problem with easy answers, and often the group plays into this by not taking responsibility and by looking to a leader who also plays into it by trying to solve the problem all by himself. The situation Moses and the people had gotten into is a perfect example of this kind of organizational psychology. The people complained that they were thirsty and blamed Moses for not taking them someplace that had water, but the issues were deeper than that.

Well, this story actually has a happy ending. And that's why it works for Seminary Sunday and works for any one of us who has ever been in an organization crazy enough to admit human beings. This story has a happy ending, but it also has a lesson that is better than anything an organizational psychologist could come up with. It's an ending that informs my ministry and that of many others, and I hope it will inform your ministries, here or out in the world as well. For the next part of the story goes like this: God, yes, God, intervenes. And God says to Moses, "Go on ahead of

the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." And Moses did so. And it was the smartest thing he could have done.

But you may be thinking, which part of this was smart? I mean, Moses had no options. He was all out of ideas. And then God essentially takes Moses to a place where there is water and shows him where it is so that the people can drink. What's smart about that? Moses gets spoon fed a solution, right? Well, what's smart is that Moses recognized he was out of ideas and stopped his acting out and turned instead to the place where he could be changed. He prayed. First step in an organizational dilemma should be prayer. Humility. Admitting to God that I have no idea what to do here. And then listening with imagination and hope for an answer. And in prayer, Moses got his answer, although it was a strange one. But in that plan with the stick and the elders and the water, God was working on Moses, trying to teach him something.

You see, the story could have gone several different ways. First, God could have just made water appear, right there, like a giant water cooler in the middle of desert. And that would have taken care of the technical problem, the people were thirsty; but it would not have taken care of the adaptive problem, the congregation was not functioning well. Another way this could have gone is that God could have told Moses where the water was and sent him there with a bucket alone to get it. Moses could have come back with this bucket full of water and been a hero. But again, that would have solved the technical problem, the people were thirsty, but not the adaptive problem, Moses had been a lone ranger too long and it was limiting what the congregation could do.

So, God leads Moses in a third option that will address both the technical and the adaptive problem and lead the organization back to health. And that is, God insists that Moses not do this alone, but he calls some other people to do it with him. The scripture says it very plainly: "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you." So God is saying, "Don't just take anyone, don't just take the whole gang, take the elders." And here, *elders* does not mean simply old people. *Elders* means the respected leaders, tried and true, who have been doing the ministry and the work of the people and who ought to be part of this event. "Take the elders," God says. "Do not do this alone."

And then, in God's genius, God does not make the water appear right there. He makes them all venture out to another place to get the water. So by having them travel, they had to spend time together. Moses had to get off his high horse of martyrdom and misery, and the elders had to step up to the plate and stop complaining and join him in solving a very serious problem of water for thirsty people. Moses and the elders had to come together, and the larger congregation stayed back and took care of things at the camp. At this point in the story, they had stopped being six-year-olds playing soccer. Now they all had their positions on the field, different assignments, different tasks, but a unified vision. The organization was returning to health.

When Moses did find water, not because of his genius, but because of God's, the scripture points out that it happened "in the sight of the elders of Israel." They witnessed God's miracle and were humbled by it together. A leader who had grown disconnected and a congregation that had set to grumbling were now ready to do

ministry again.

I think about these stories from Exodus every day. And I think anybody who works with people should think about them every day as well. But in particular as a religious leader, these are the stories I read to be corrected, to be inspired, to be reminded that God's been working on our group dynamics for a while. These stories tell us what our shared ministry should not be, but they also point to what it can be when we work together, all of us playing our own positions on the field.

On this Seminary Sunday, when we as a congregation consider what it would mean to produce future leaders for the church who will go to seminary, while that is a noble goal, let's not think that that alone is the answer. We can produce as many ministers as we want, but if we don't have the elders as well, we'll end up like Moses at his worst, cursing at his critics, and like that congregation at its worst, complaining about but not doing the ministry.

Instead, if we study these stories and take discipleship seriously, we can be the church at its best. We can be the Israelites at their strongest, being brave and courageous in the desert, standing together for what is right under the toughest of circumstances. If we take shared leadership seriously, we can be the soccer team that has the confidence to spread out across the field so that, for example, some of you spread out in ministry teams throughout the church while others of you may be doing your ministry work in your jobs or your school or in civic life. The playing field then becomes large with more than enough room for the team to spread out.

And as we spread out, some of us may go to seminary, some of us may go to cooking school, some of us may study religion, some of us may study economics, some of us may write sermons, some of us may write letters to the editor, some of us may teach Sunday school, some of us may teach elementary school, but every one of us is playing a crucial position, and all of us are on the same team.

It's that kind of game that got the Israelites out of the desert and into the Promised Land. And if you remember the story, Moses didn't get to see it. He died before arriving. It was as if God wanted to make this same point one last time. It's not about one player. It's about the whole team.