



First United Church of Oak Park

Not One Person

Exodus 18 (selected verses)

John Edgerton

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Jethro, he is not a super important figure in the Bible. He is not a leading man of the people of God. In fact, he isn't even an Israelite. He's from Midian. He only connects with the people because Moses was on the run from murder charges in Egypt and came to Midian to hide out. And there, Moses met Jethro's daughter and married her and, just like that, Jethro was stitched into the story of the redemption of the people of Israel from slavery. Just like that, Jethro came to be a counselor to Moses. I'll repeat that: Jethro, who could accurately be described as "some guy," happened to give advice to MOSES.

And—unlike Jethro—Moses is an important figure in the Bible, to put it mildly. To put it floridly, Moses is the apotheosis of priesthood, having direct conversations with God. He is the prototypical leader of the people, guiding the people through the wilderness. He is the archetype of wisdom, laying out comprehensive laws for societal life. Moses is the one who should be giving other people advice, right? But no, Jethro, gives advice to Moses. How does that happen?

First off, it has to do with the fact that Jethro is family, Moses' father-in-law. If one is ever in danger of floating up into the stratosphere of self-importance, trust family to bring them back down to earth. Jethro hears about his son-in-law leading the Israelite people out of bondage and then out into the wilderness. So Jethro travels from Midian and finds the Israelites. And there in the camp, Jethro takes a bit of time getting caught up with Moses. Moses tells Jethro all that had transpired in the flight from Egypt. Moses tells Jethro about the amazing things that God did for the people. And so taken in is Jethro by this that he begins to worship this God, too! Even though he is a man of Midian, he comes to worship the God of Israel, claiming his place in that community and making their lot his own.

Then, Jethro spends the next day watching how the camp functioned. And if Jethro was awestruck by the God of Israel, he was...uh...somewhat underwhelmed by the leader of Israel, that is, Moses. Because what Moses did from dawn to dusk was to settle disputes, solve problems, adjudicate the law. Every sort of matter from great to small was brought to Moses. And that is because the people all viewed Moses as the apotheosis of priesthood, the prototypical leader, the archetype of wisdom. And so because all authority was vested in Moses, the people brought all questions requiring authoritative answers to Moses.

And Jethro watched Moses solve dispute after dispute, problem after problem, disagreement after disagreement, from dawn to dusk, all day long. It's all that he did.

And as dusk fell and Moses stopped holding court, Jethro came to Moses, apotheosis of priesthood, crème de la crème, and said—what are you doing?

You're going to wear yourself out like this! Wear yourself out and all these people will be worn out with you! You don't need to do everything, you can't do everything, trying to do everything is a bad idea! There should be other leaders, over tens, fifties, hundreds, thousands even. Leadership should arise from among the people, taken up by those who are of the people. And this is what Moses does, this is what the people do: they distribute leadership among the people. Able leaders begin to settle matters themselves, people embrace what it means to be accountable to one another rather than to one person, people lived into what it meant to be a people of God: not a person of God with a bunch of folks following him, but a people of God.

And here, right here.

Friends, neighbors, Oak Parkers, I give you, the birth of Congregationalism! And Presbyterianism too. The leaders the people need are called from among the people; it's all the same water down there at the bottom of the well, whichever bucket we use to haul it up.

The church--this church for sure--the church is not about a person of God with a bunch of folks following that one guy. All the way back to Jethro's advice to Moses we can all see that the people of God are to be a self-governing people, led by those from among the people, accountable to one another, led by able people from among the whole community. And that is how things should be, no matter how good of a single leader you might have. Not even MOSES was so good that all authority should be vested in him, not even Moses was wise enough that the community would be better off if that one guy got to decide everything. Not even Moses. The people of God from all the way back to the days of Jethro, the people are supposed to be led from within, by many, not one.

For the model of Jethro to work, for the image of the people of God set up in Scripture to work, for anything like a Congregational, or Presbyterian, or any earthly vision of the church to work, if the people of God are to do the work—the people have to do the work. The people have to do it. It's all well and good for Jethro to just throw out there—hey, have you considered a more decentralized means of achieving these goals, more of a collaborative kind of a model? Well, that's great, Jethro, as long as the people say yes.

That is why it is so important, what we are going to do here in a few minutes in our service: the ordination of elders and deacons. Because we are continuing in the tradition of leadership that has allowed the people of God to maintain faithfulness for millennia.

So my message for you all, all the way from Jethro to today is, sign up for church teams. When people call you about it, and they will, say yes. If you're sitting here thinking—they never call me to ask about serving on a team...Tell you what. This week, think about what kind of work you might be interested in at the church, what kind

of ministry would build up the church and build up your own faith. And once you've thought about it a bit, write down on a pink prayer card that you want to serve on a team of the church. If you do that, in addition to gladdening the heart of God, you will gladden the heart of Barb Metric, chair of the Nominating Team! When the Children's Ministry team is asking for help teaching Sunday School, say yes, because it is going to be work. Because it will be a real lift, a lift on behalf of the people, because it will be work, say yes. When the PAL note crew is looking for people to be PAL note writers, say yes. When Faith in Action is asking people to write witness slips or attend a United Power Action, say yes. Do the work of the people of God, together. It's what Moses did, and that should count for something.

Amen.