

DELEGATION OF FIRE

A Devotional Meditation on Yitro (Jethro)

Exodus 18:1-20:26; Isaiah 6:1-7:5, 9:6-7

Acts 6:1-6, 10:34-35, 17:22-31; Romans 2:14-15, 27; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9

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My Scoutmasters taught me much about leadership. They taught by example, imparting through patient mentorship the knowledge and skills they had acquired through years of experience. We learned by doing – which meant continuously demonstrating both the knowledge and skills we learned, and the character traits necessary to use our knowledge and skills effectively.

“Learning by doing” meant increasingly more difficult tests of leadership. I failed nearly as often as I succeeded. One spectacular failure occurred during my first campout as a patrol leader. We had several tasks to make our campsite secure and comfortable, such as setting up common areas for cooking, washing, and collecting trash, collecting water from the nearby source, gathering firewood, and building our communal fire. To be honest, I had only a vague idea of what to do, and even less



Kindling a fire. Photo by Fr Lawrence Lew, O.P., March 29, 2014, [via Flickr](#).

understanding of the abilities of the Scouts under my leadership. I did know my own limitations, such as my embarrassing inability to build a fire. That’s why, in assigning tasks, I made sure the job of fire building went to anyone but me.

That’s where my failure occurred. The Scout I chose as fire builder had even less confidence at kindling a fire than I did. While I joined the other boys in taking care of the remaining tasks, this young man became frustrated and angry at having been handed a job he was not equipped to accomplish. He may have been in tears by the time he appealed to our Scoutmaster. I learned about my mistake when the Scoutmaster took me aside for a counseling session. He told me that someone had been dispatched to make a fire, but that he was not told what kind of fire, nor where to put it, and neither was he offered any help from someone who could guide him through the task.

He didn’t have to say much more. The burning shame of my leadership failure was already evident in my face as I realized I had done injury to someone I was supposed to help become a contributing member of our Scouting community. That’s when I began to realize that leadership is less about getting tasks accomplished to the letter, and more about lifting others up so they can walk through life on their own.

I take comfort in knowing that some of the greatest leaders have had to learn this truth through failures of their own. Moses had several, such as the failure he was in the process of accomplishing when his father-in-law Jethro intervened. My failure was trying to get

someone else to do what I was unwilling to do, but Moses had the opposite problem: he seemed unwilling to trust others to do what he could do. That may be why he took on himself the responsibility of listening to the complaints, questions, disputes, and frustrations of the entire Hebrew nation. It didn't take long for Jethro to see the problem, and prescribe a solution:

But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you're doing is no good. You will surely wear yourself out, as well as these people who are with you, because the task is too heavy for you. You cannot do it alone, by yourself. Now listen to my voice—I will give you advice, and may God be with you! You, represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God. Enlighten them as to the statutes and the laws, and show them the way by which they must walk and the work they must do. But you should seek out capable men out of all the people—men who fear God, men of truth, who hate bribery. Appoint them to be rulers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them judge the people all the time. Then let every major case be brought to you, but every minor case they can judge for themselves. Make it easier for yourself, as they bear the burden with you. If you do this thing as God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their places in *shalom*."

Exodus 18:17-23 TLV

Moses' problem, like mine, had to do with delegation of authority. As an elderly former prince of Egypt, Moses had more knowledge and experience than I had as a teenaged Boy Scout. Even so, he had questions about how to delegate what he and he alone had received directly from the Almighty. It's possible that no one before Moses had such a weighty matter on his shoulders. Against all odds and expectations, he was thrust into leadership of an entire nation that had just been extracted from its familiar surroundings and transported to a desert wilderness. There was no other recognized leader, and the masses of people were still dazed and confused at having had their world completely upended. There was no established priesthood, emergency service, police force, or standing military to help carry the load. In fact, the whole nation was still a disorganized nation-in-being, barely able to function beyond the family and clan level, and hardly able to assimilate the multitude of foreigners who had walked out of Egypt with them. This was far beyond any challenge Moses had faced while part of the Egyptian royal house. He desperately needed the LORD's counsel, but until he got some help, he would not find a moment's rest to seek out that counsel.

That's why Jethro's advice came at just the right moment. Moses probably knew exactly what Jethro suggested regarding delegation of authority to reliable leaders, but he needed a reminder – especially about how to choose qualified leaders. They had to be proven, God-fearing leaders who had earned a reputation for integrity.

The process of choosing leaders would have taken a while, but it could have begun immediately by a call from Moses to have each family, clan, and tribe go first to their own leaders before carrying any matter to Moses. Fathers, mothers, and clan and tribe elders would likely have welcomed the opportunity to step back into their accustomed roles – roles that they may have surmised Moses was usurping by having all the people come to him. Thus, returning authority to the local level not only freed Moses from tremendous

burdens, but also defused potential divisions by transforming the local leaders from adversaries into allies.

Not a single one of them would do the job the way Moses did, but all of them would understand and operate under the same principles of righteousness Moses demonstrated by example. If there was any question about those principles, God Himself offered explanation with His Ten Commandments. Ideally, every tribe, clan, and family would find appropriate ways to honor the Name of God, worship Him in spirit and truth, keep His Sabbath holy, honor their parents, respect the dignity of every human being, and respect property rights. There would be many right answers, but only one wrong answer: blatant rejection of God's standards – including rejection by maintaining an appearance of obedience as a cover to do whatever one pleased.

It may be that Moses' greatest lesson in delegation was in learning that no one would had to represent God exactly the same way as he did. Moses' task was to find a way to hold the people to God's principles, while allowing them the latitude to act on those principles in ways consistent with their own circumstances, cultures, and norms.

This is the diversity our Creator has built into the humanity He made in His image. He first delegated His authority to us, and then expected us to learn His ways, and repeat the delegation and learning process with those who come after us. That's the point of the two greatest commandments: we love our God by learning and holding to the standards of His principles; we love our neighbors by respecting their ways of upholding His principles. What we want to avoid are the fatal errors of either rejecting our Creator's principles, or rejecting our neighbor's boundaries by insisting our way is the only proper way to obey and serve our God. We will have failures, but if handled properly, those failures will result in a greater capacity to act as our Creator's expression of Himself in His universe.