

The Good Father (in Law)  
Exodus 18:1-27  
June 15, 2008

Last Sunday we began our summer vacation from the revised common lectionary to visit some of the unknown stories and unsung heroes of the Bible that the lectionary just doesn't have time to include. Many of these stories will be Old Testament stories, and today is no exception. Before you heard the scripture read this morning, how many of you, if asked could have told who Jethro was? Jethro is one of those unsung heroes. He was Moses' father-in-law. And other than this 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus, he gets not mention in the rest of the Bible except for a passing mention in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Exodus where it says Moses was tending Jethro's sheep when he saw the burning bush.

Yet Jethro is a significant person in the life of Moses and the life of the Israelite people, and if he was significant to them, then he is significant to us; in his own way he furthered God's plan for them and for us. Like many of those whom God uses, he's an outsider, a Midianite priest, not a believer in Yahweh, the Israelite God. When Moses escaped from Egypt after having murdered an Egyptian soldier for beating a Hebrew slave, he came to an oasis near Midian, and the seven daughters of Jethro were there drawing water for their father's sheep. But some shepherds drove them away, and Moses came to their defense and watered their flock. Later on, Jethro would invite Moses to dinner to thank him for intervening on behalf of his daughters, one of whom, Zipporah became Moses' wife and the mother of his two sons Gershom and Eliazer.

After Moses received his call from God to return to Egypt and free the Hebrew slaves, he went to Jethro to receive permission to go, and later Zipporah and the children returned to the safety of Jethro's home while Moses confronted Pharaoh. In today's story Moses and Jethro are reunited after a long separation. And it seems to me that on this father's day, we can find a lesson in family relationships from how they interact with one another – a lesson good for all of us whether we're mothers or mothers-in-law, fathers or fathers-in-law, grandparents, sons or daughters.

Jethro had heard of Moses' exploits and so he comes bringing Zipporah and the children for a reunion with their husband and father. When they meet, Moses, although he has done great and amazing things for God, greets his father-in-law with humility, bowing to him and kissing him. And then scripture says something significant, "each asked after the other's welfare." Moses didn't launch into a retelling of his exploits until after he'd inquired about Jethro. And Jethro didn't begin to catch Moses up on what had been happening in Midian before first expressing an interest in what Moses had been doing. There is mutual respect for and interest about the other in their relationship. They are both genuinely concerned for one another, curious about what each has been doing, interested in the welfare of the other.

There is such a lesson there for us. How well do we listen to one another? To our parents? To our in-laws? To our children? How sincere are we in our inquiries? In some families I am afraid the obligatory question "How are you?" is only a perfunctory gesture designed to get to the more important stuff – how we are, what we want, and perhaps what they can do for us. How well do we listen to each others' stories? How much do we really know about each other?

All this comes home this week with the unexpected loss of Tim Russert, NBC political analyst and moderator of "Meet the Press," and a local person Rebecca Alpaugh called me about, Elizabeth Brown, who died of a heart attack at 39 years old. Russert had written a book about his father which contained many family memories, and it will be a treasure to his son Luke. And

I hope Elizabeth Brown's family will collect stories of her for her children so that they will know their mother better.

I've been reading *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch, a college computer science professor at U. Pittsburg. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and at the age of 46 and gave a lecture to the student body about his life, his childhood dreams and the life lessons he's learned along the way. His real goal in giving the lecture was not just to instruct these students, but to leave a video record for his small children of their dad so that they would know him better.

I am more aware of the importance of passing on our stories now that both my parents and grandparents are deceased. How I wish I'd listened to their stories more closely. And how much more I wish I knew than the little bit I do know. I always thought there would be time for that later. If you don't know where your parents went to school, who their best friend in grade school was, what their first pet was named, what their dreams and aspirations were when they were children, then today is as good as any day to get started finding out. What were their greatest satisfactions? greatest disappointments? favorite memories? And if your children don't ask you, then write it down. I don't think writing down our memoirs – which may be a kind of fancy word for memories – is an ego trip. It is an effort to join the past to the future, to keep the circle unbroken. And, someday, trust me, your children will want to know.

After greeting one another, Moses and Jethro go into Jethro's tent and then Moses fills him in on all that had transpired with Pharaoh. And scripture says, "Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel." And Jethro even comes to a greater understanding of God by listening to Moses tales of his miraculous adventure. Although he is a priest of the Midianites, he is able to say, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians when they dealt arrogantly with them." And then Jethro offered a burnt offering to God with the help of Aaron, Moses' brother and high priest, and the elders of Israel.

Some have called this a great evangelism story because Jethro comes to a fuller knowledge of God by what Moses tells him. But, what I like about it is that Moses tells the story and Jethro draws his own conclusions. Moses doesn't tell his story in order to convert Jethro to his God, but in the hearing and in the telling, Jethro's understanding of the workings of God is increased. That is the way it works in our family relationships too; our children hear and see us as we live our lives, and in those actions or inactions we preach our own sermon. And also, our children, our grandchildren, are listening even when we think they're not, always watching even when we don't know it. And they learn about life, about relationships, about God from what they observe from us. Scary proposition! I like the story about some persons who were talking about which translation of the Bible they liked best. One liked the King James version because of the beauty of the language; another liked the Revised Standard because of the accuracy of its translations; another preferred the New Revised Standard Version because of its inclusive language; and still another preferred the New International Version because it is easy to read. The last person remarked, "Of all the translations, I think I like my father's the best." And when asked, "You mean your father has translated the Bible," he answered, "Oh yes, every day he translated the Bible to me in his life of love, compassion, forgiveness, and sacrifice."

In the final verses of today's reading, Jethro ventures into a very risky place. He offers advice to his son-in-law! I'm new to this in-law business, but I hope I will be very, very slow and very, very thoughtful before I presume to offer advice, especially unsolicited advice, to my new son-in-law. That's the place where mothers-in-law get their bad reputations! But here in this story maybe there's a clue about how to go about it. After the big reunion the night before, life goes back to normal in the camp. Moses is hard at work listening to the problems of his people. As their leader, he is available to them, practically 24/7 to mediate disputes and solve problems. And Jethro watches all of this. He doesn't interrupt what's going on, he doesn't

interfere, but at the end of the day he asks about it. “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?” And so Moses explains that he is their leader and as such has a responsibility to God and to them to help them with their various problems.

Then Jethro makes an observation that shows his concern for Moses’ health and well-being. “What you are doing is not good,” he says, “you will surely wear yourself out . . . the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.” Notice he doesn’t tell him that from years of being chief priest in Midian, and from reading all the best books on leadership, that he knows best and that Moses is woefully inept at managing his time and resources. No, he’s genuinely concerned that Moses is going to burn out if he keeps going the way he’s been going. And then what good will he be to God or to anybody?

So he makes what probably seems to us a simple suggestion – delegate! Keep the difficult cases, but let other trustworthy people handle the lesser cases. And sure enough! Moses does it, and life gets better for everybody! Sometimes it just takes the careful, loving observation of an outsider to help us to see what is up too close for us to see for ourselves. Sometimes that outside voice can spot the problem. Then the issue becomes, will we listen to the solution or become defensive. It is so easy to be defensive and to take offense at a word of constructive criticism, even when it is offered from someone who loves us and who wants the best for us, even when it is couched in the most diplomatic of terms. It is a measure of Moses’ character that he is able to listen to what Jethro suggests without becoming defensive and come to his own conclusion that Jethro is right; there is a better way.

The story ends with Jethro’s departure to go back home. There’s a lesson there too. Visits are good, but shouldn’t last forever. Jethro didn’t move in with Moses and Zipporah; he went back home to Midian and to his life there. I used to work with an eccentric and opinionated person who believed “fish and company both smell after three days!” Well, hopefully in-laws and parents are welcome for a few more than three days, but there’s wisdom in a short time well spent. Jethro honors Moses’ independence and separate life, as Moses honors Jethro’s. They separate from each other still friends, and having become better persons for the time spent together and more aware of God’s presence and purpose in their lives. Jethro has learned more about the amazing and mysterious workings of God, and Moses has learned about how to organize his work more efficiently. All this was based on their mutual respect for one another, their willingness, in fact eagerness, to listen to one another, and to share the best of themselves with one another.

Jethro is an unsung hero of the Bible, but an appropriate one for us today as we celebrate our family relationships and give thanks for the fathers and fathers-in-law God has blessed us with in our own lives.