

“Breaking the Bottleneck”

Exodus 18:13-27

Series: Exodus – ReOpening God’s Way Week 2. Open Your Arms

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

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After several intense, high level meetings the strategies are approved, the tactics confirmed, the plan of attack finalized and ready to launch. Am I speaking about the Battle of Gettysburg? No. A vacation at Disney World. At the end of April our entire family planned to spend a week at the Happiest Place on Earth. These days, a trip to the Magic Kingdom requires more planning than the invasion of Normandy. Sixty days before D-Day (Disney Day), there was a conference call of the joint chiefs-of-staff (Lisa, Kristin and Jackie). The objective: secure fast-passes so we can skip the lines for the hottest rides. All systems were go.

And then corona came. The invasion, I mean the vacation, was cancelled. That week instead of standing in line to ride Star Wars Rise of the Resistance, I stood in line, six feet apart, in the rain to get into Home Depot and Shop Rite. And once I finished shopping, I stood in another line stretching to the back of the store to check out. Why didn’t I plan ahead and get a fast-pass?

Nobody likes to wait in line – in traffic, in the store, at the DMV. Yet that is what God’s people did all day in Exodus 18. Picture an endlessly long line of Israelites queuing up to talk with Moses under the hot Sinai sun. Every single question and complaint is brought to him for a judgment. “His ox sat on my tent.” “You stole my quail burgers right off the grill.” “Do you have gluten free manna?” Moses is trapped at a never-ending customer complaint desk in the sticks with the hicks. How do we know? His father-in-law’s named is Jethro.

Yet Jethro is much smarter than you think. In this third week of our series Exodus: Re Opening God’s Way, Jethro teaches Moses and us a priceless lesson about reopening. When we feel burdened, weighed down and overwhelmed, we need to open our arms and ask for help.

The last time Jethro saw his son-in-law, Moses was a frightened shepherd heading back to Egypt on an impossible mission. Apparently God spoke to Moses through a burning bush and sent him to free His people from slavery. One day, years later, Jethro opens the front flap of his tent. There stands Moses on the stoop backed by hundreds of thousands of newly freed Israelites. “Mission accomplished,” Moses smiles. But now Moses faces an equally overwhelming job: organizing them into a nation. The job is so stressful Moses has no time for his wife and children. He sends them away to Jethro. Dad knows something is wrong. When Jethro brings Moses’ family back he is shocked to see what’s going on.

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?” Exodus 13:13-14

Moses creates a **Bottleneck**. Every decision and judgment must be rendered by him. When only one lane is open on the turnpike, when only one register is open at the grocery store you get a bottleneck which slows everyone down. How did Moses get to be the bottleneck?

Moses answered him, “Because the people come to me to seek God’s will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God’s decrees and instructions.” Exodus 18:15-16

You can read these lines with a whining voice, “The people won’t leave me alone,” a frustrated voice, “Can’t someone else make a decision?” or a prideful voice, “I’m the only one who can speak for God.” Jethro knows it’s just a pile of camel dung. He doesn’t hold back one bit.

Moses’ father-in-law replied, “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Exodus 18:17-18

‘You’re burning yourself and everyone else out. Don’t be a bottleneck Moses.’

Are you feeling overwhelmed and overworked? You have to juggle working at home, school or camp online, navigating grocery stores, caring for sick or vulnerable people, daily deciding what you can or cannot do. Much of this is unavoidable. Yet we make it worse by being a bottleneck – by doing it alone, by loading up our arms with all the burdens.

How do you and I become a bottleneck? Take a minute and think about a task you find exhausting and overwhelming. Now be honest with yourself: in your mind do you ever think any of these thoughts?

- It’s just easier for me to do it
- I don’t have time to teach you
- I don’t want to burden you
- If you want it done right you have to do it yourself
- Nobody can do it as good as me

This is the self-talk that builds up the bottleneck. Underneath these thoughts are three liars:

- Ego – I must do this because they need me.
- Self-Pity – I must do this because then they will feel sorry for me.
- Fear – I must do this because if I ask for help they might reject me or I will look weak.

So what’s so bad about a bottleneck? Jethro makes it clear: the burden is too heavy for one person, it wears everyone out and nothing gets done. I learned long ago if I try to do everything myself, I not only wear myself out, our church cannot accomplish God’s mission and I am denying you the joy of using your gifts to serve God in His personal calling for you.

Jethro is an excellent coach. He gives Moses a solution that applies at work, at home, in school, in the community and here at church. If you want to break the bottleneck, have less stress in your life, get more done and fill people with joy follow Jethro's advice.

Find Your True Calling Moses is doing too many jobs. Jethro shows him the right one.

Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Exodus 18:19

Each of us has a calling from God. We spent weeks after Easter helping you discover you are MADE FOR MORE – you have a calling from God unique to you. Like Moses you are the connecting link between people and God. Jesus put you on this earth for a purpose. If you are still searching for your calling, let me or one of our staff members help you find it. Once you know what God calls you to do, you also can see what you are NOT called to do, tasks you can give to others, jobs others can probably do better than you. Don't just drop or dump it on them.

Train Others In Their Calling Jethro next advises Moses to:

Teach them (God's) decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. Exodus 18: 20

There are two tragic mistakes we make: 1. We don't ask people serve and 2. We don't train them to serve. We usually don't ask people because we are afraid they will say, "No." Let me tell you a little secret: some will say "No." Get over it. Don't take it personally and don't give up. Move on to the next person and keep asking until someone says, "Yes." The number 1 reason I hear why people don't serve in the church is no one asked them. The second tragic mistake is not coaching and training the one who says "Yes." We are often so relieved we just dump the job on them without any coaching. Remember: Be a Barnabas – coach and train people. "Show them" Jethro says. Model the ministry for them. When they are ready, step back and let them do it. Continue coaching them and encourage them to start coaching someone else.

Break Up the Task and Let them Do It Jethro next advises Moses to divide and conquer.

But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. Exodus 18:21-22

Choose people who trust God and are trusted by the others and give them the power and the permission to do their calling. Moses will still handle the hard cases but all others will be solved in smaller groups. This will break the bottleneck. No more standing in line. No one has to bear all the burden and get burned out. Everyone gets to play on the team. A whole lot more gets done. Jethro concluded his advice by saying,

That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.” Exodus 18:22-23

Then a miracle occurred. For the first time in history a man took advice from his father-in-law.

I witnessed Jethro’s advice happen years ago at Woodside. Before 2005, Woodside, like most churches, had committees for every ministry. These small groups were composed of faithful, good people who wanted to do God’s will. The typical committee usually had four or five people. Yet despite their good intentions, the committees were bottlenecks. Take for example the Mission Committee. They loved God and were passionate about mission. Unfortunately, since there were only four or five people on the committee, they could only do about four or five things a year – canned goods collection, used clothing collection, school supply collection, angel tree gifts at Christmas and a couple of mission trips. That was a lot for most churches.

In 2005 we broke the bottleneck and got rid of committees and something amazing started to happen. Instead of the Mission Committee doing all the mission, many people of Woodside started rising up to lead missions. Now, in addition to the collections we did, we began hosting the homeless with Code Blue, feeding the hungry with the Dinner Ministry, leading worship in prison, recovery worship services and coffee houses with CLPRM, building Habitat for Humanity houses, cleaning up the streets with Adopt a Highway, hosting homeless families through Family Promise, helping young people in Trenton with Urban Promise, sending out multiple mission trips to the US, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas, supporting wells, orphanages and churches in Zambia and Mozambique and house churches in India, and we energized other congregations to get out and do mission through the Church Has Left the Building.

Now as good as all this is: we can do more. We are only just scratching the surface. CoVid19 revealed something to me. A church that only meets in a building is not virus proof. Some churches who depend on their building will not survive this virus. Even now, we are meeting outside because, understandably, many of you do not want to meet inside. This virus proves to me this building can be a bottleneck. The corona virus forced us to find a way to be church without the bottleneck. Now that we are online, more people from all over the country, even all over the world, can join us. What’s more, it’s estimated that only 40% of Americans will even consider attending a church service in a building. That means no matter how wonderful the worship and ministries we offer in the building are, if 60% of Americans refuse to come in the building it’s highly unlikely they will meet Jesus. The building is a bottleneck and we have to break it.

How? The same way Jethro said. We have to multiply. We need to form multiple microchurches – tiny churches of 4-8 people led by all of you. Microchurches don’t need a building they can meet anywhere. Microchurches don’t need a seminary trained pastor – any Christian can lead them. All you need is a Bible and the Holy Spirit. Microchurches don’t meet only on Sunday – they can meet any day or time of the week. A hundred Microchurches can accomplish more missions than a single congregation. And Microchurches can reach the 60% who would never consider coming inside our building. Microchurches make disciples who make disciples who start more Microchurches.

Now please don't be scared. I realize Microchurches are not for everyone. We will still have worship and ministry inside this building. We will continue to have church as you know it for those who want it. But if you are hungering for something more, if you feel God calling you to experiment with a microchurch I can help you get started right away. Microchurches were the way God started the church and they are now the way God is renewing the church.

And we need them. How can the Church possibly rise up, combat and dismantle racism in all its forms? How can the Church address and transform the way our neighbors with severe mental illness are treated? How can the Church fight the scourge of addiction? How can the Church set prisoners free? How can the Church put a halt to human trafficking? How can the Church provide health and home to those who are homeless? How can the Church provide a way out for those trapped in system and cycle of poverty? How can the Church make disciples who share the liberating, life-giving news of Jesus Christ with the lost, the least and the lonely?

We have to break the Bottleneck.