

Leaders Lead Best Facedown

You have been called by God to pastor First Church. They seem to be living in bondage to the Egypt of 'Old Time Religion' (the mid-twentieth century kind) and your role is to lead them into the Promised Land of missional connection to the Postmodern culture that surrounds them. They have no idea how to get to this Promised Land but they really want to go there...they think. They have few resources and are lacking the imaginative framework necessary for them to not only envision the Promised Land but to even grasp the kind of commitment and changes necessary to arrive at that destination. You, for obvious reasons, are reluctant to lead this congregation. It is going to take years of blood, sweat, and tears to turn this wrong-headed ship around and you know it. Your spouse knows it too, which is why he/she suggests that serving as a missionary to Iceland would be easier than leading First Church from point A (The Egypt of yesterday) to point B (The Promised Land of tomorrow). Against your better judgment, but out of obedience to God's call, you go.

This scenario is very much like the call of God upon Moses. Moses was commissioned by God, through a burning bush of all things, to lead a large group of Hebrew slaves out of bondage to Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. The Hebrews up to that point had been slaves for about four hundred years, so they had no idea what life outside of slavery was like but they knew enough to know they wanted out. Their resources were limited and they had no idea how to survive the wilderness journey that would lead them to the Promised Land, but they were willing to take the risk-on most days. Moses was not all that excited about this daunting challenge either. He actually made a few excuses, trying his best to inform God that His leadership choice for this mission was less than ideal. "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Ex. 4:10). I also imagine that Moses' wife, Zipporah, probably encouraged him to serve God in Iceland instead. But it's difficult to say "no" to God after He speaks through a burning but unconsumed bush; so Moses goes to Egypt to begin his tenure as leader of the Hebrews.

In your first couple of months as the pastor of First Church things are going great. The people clearly love you and let you know, in not so many words, that you are the best pastor since the Apostle Paul. Every Sunday you receive rave reviews of your sermons from people who have exquisite homiletic taste. You even get a few "that message will transform my life" remarks. You're eating it up, but that's not all you're eating. You have had meal after meal in peoples' homes, building relationships as you care for the "flock." Almost every other day in that first month, congregant's have delivered homemade pies, cakes, and breads to your home. You are ten pounds heavier, but you feel loved. You remember, however, that you're not there to simply eat pastries. God called you there to lead the church out of the Egypt of missional impotence and into the Promised Land of prayerful and strategic impact for Christ. So you put the donut down and head off to work.

Realizing your call, you begin to make a few changes here and there that will begin to chart First Church's course through the wilderness toward the destination. You experiment with the worship service by exploring a variety of musical styles, adding a few liturgical elements such as creeds and multiple Scripture readings, and making room for intimate and authentic connection through public sharing and small group prayer during the service. You do this because you want to help the people experience some of the best that two thousand years in Christian worship has to offer.

You also decide it would be a good idea to discontinue some ineffective and resource-draining programs like the women's auxiliary group and the midweek children's meeting in order to add a few outreach ministries to First Church's programs. You run this by some of the key people most affected by these changes and they seem okay with it. It is obvious that most of the people are too tired to take on yet another volunteer ministry. But, by taking a few ministries off of the church's programmatic plate and adding a few that are more missional in nature, you keep people from potential burnout. Some members try their best to convince you that there is no need to add any major outreach ministries and events. "All we need to do is hand out some tracts door-to-door a couple times a year," they kindly suggest. You want to laugh, or perhaps cry, but instead you simply steer the conversation toward the weather and those delicious cherry pies that Mrs. Betty Cobbler (or is it "Crocker") brings you weekly.

Two months after making changes to the worship service, cutting some ineffective and resource-draining programs, and adding a few "out-of-the-box" outreach ministries, you get a knock at your door from a group of First Church board members. You are secretly disappointed that there are no pastries in their hands, but you let them into your home anyway. Once you get a pot of coffee going for these three visitors you ask, "What can I do for you?" The vice-chair of the board speaks up and says, "Well, pastor, we're here to ask for your resignation." They voice, in effect, "We would rather go back to Egypt than travel through this uncomfortable and unpredictable wilderness to get to the Promised Land of missional impact." The board members don't put it in these words, but that is precisely what they're saying.

This is essentially what the liberated Hebrews said to Moses after he reluctantly stepped up to God's call to lead them out of slavery. "All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt" (Numbers 14:2-4). What a slap in the face of Moses! After putting his reputation and life on the line for these Hebrews in order to, by God's grace, lead them to a better day, this is how they appreciate him? Moses could have played it safe in Midian living the quiet and predictable life of a shepherd. Sheep can be stubborn and flighty but they're not as difficult as people. I suspect this was Moses' initial response.

Before considering Moses' leadership response to the complaints of the Hebrews, how would you respond to the three First Church board members sitting in your living asking you to resign for no other reason but your willingness to pursue what God has called you to do and what the church clearly needs you to do? To be honest, my initial response might be to get angry and defensive. I might be tempted to spew out words like, "Fine, go back to the Egypt of 'Old Time Religion' and let First Church die a slow, agonizing death as you fail to impact your community. I don't need you people or your pastries anyway; I would rather pastor a church in Iceland than a cold church like First Church. Now get out of my house, I mean the parsonage, before I sic my dog and my children on you." While these thoughts might float around the private orbit of our minds, I trust (and hope) that most of us would respond with more spiritual couth.

Moses did not respond as many of us, admittedly, might have. Instead, his immediate response in the face of conflict with the very people he was called to lead was one of *holy humility*. After the Hebrews challenge and devalue Moses leadership, we read that "...Moses and Aaron fell *facedown* in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there" (Numbers 14:5). While this was clearly a sign of Moses' disappointment with the people, it was also a symbol of humility.

Remember that the book of Numbers already told us that “Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (12:3). (Since I don’t think Moses took pride in his humility, I suspect this came not from the pen of Moses but from a scribal editor of the Pentateuch). Moses didn’t retaliate, get defensive, sic his children, dog or sheep on them, or threaten a move to Iceland. He simply did perhaps the only thing he could have done as a leader called by God to lead potential-laden but stubborn people; he fell “facedown.” This moment of holy humility enabled Moses to fall upon the loving affirmation and strength of God before he said or did anything that would discredit not only his leadership but the God his leadership represented. It was on his face that Moses found the capacity from God to lead in the face of such disappointing circumstances.

Perhaps you can recall times in your pastoral leadership when you experienced such extreme disappointment, depression, discouragement, disgust, or even despair that all you could muster was the strength it takes to literally fall facedown before God. There have been several painful periods in my ministry when I would walk into my study and find myself incapable of doing anything else but falling on my face in humility before God. I wanted to either fight back, quite, or coast but the weight of God’s Spirit brought me to knees and onto my face. And in those moments He tends to whisper into our leadership ears what He whispered into Moses’ ears earlier in the story, “I will be with you” (Ex. 3:12a). This does not mean that the conflict will go away overnight or that there won’t be pain to come and further trials to bear. All He promises Moses and leaders the likes of us is simply His presence, sometimes nothing more but always nothing less. I have discovered that when the rubber of conflict meets the road of leadership, His presence is enough when I have the holy humility to run to Him instead of running from Him to other comforts, mostly unhealthy conflict-compounding comforts.

There was something else that Moses found while on his face. The holy humility of Moses that helped him maintain focus on God in the midst of conflict also enabled him to possess a **godly grace** toward the very difficult, cantankerous people who initiated the conflict. A few verses after Moses fell “facedown,” God reveals his burning anger. God is so angry with the people for their ingratitude to Him and Moses that he wants to “smite them” (Numbers 14:12a). Can you blame Him? If I were Moses I might, on my worst days, say something like “Go ahead, God, let’ em have it. Make sure you get the guy on the right side fifth pew over there.” Instead, Moses does the unthinkable. He actually intercedes to God on behalf of the people with godly grace by praying, “In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.” The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked” (Numbers 14:19-20).

It seems that pastoral leaders have a tug of war going on inside of us between a Machiavellian style of leadership and the leadership example of Christ. Machiavelli might suggest to Moses and pastors-in-conflict, “you’ve got to stave off the nitwits who are determined to bring you down. You won’t let them. You’ll crush them, hear their bones break, their windpipes snap” (Bing 62). Christian leaders, however, “must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice and guidance” (Nouwen 45). God’s profound presence seems to rest most favorably upon those leaders who know how to fall facedown with holy humility toward the One who calls us and then rise up with godly grace toward those we’ve been called to lead.

This is easier said than done. I know more than a few pastors who in the heat of an unwarranted, unfair conflict respond in ways they later regret. Some get up in the middle of an uncomfortable

meeting and walk out without a goodbye or an explanation. Others get their hackles up and go toe-to-toe and tooth-for-tooth, fighting verbal abuse with verbal abuse toward their “enemies.” Then there are those who are more covert in their less than Christ-like response. They smile and greet their dissenters warmly but speak evil of them to others. These seemingly congenial, supposedly godly pastors begin an underground smear campaign against the very people they have been called by God to lovingly lead from Egypt to Canaan. An even more covert but equally hazardous response is when a pastoral leader responds to conflict by inwardly refusing to love and give her best to the people she has been called to serve. These pastors retaliate not by making obvious waves that might get them fired, but by continuing to collect a paycheck from the church while they have absolutely no intention of leading them to the Promised Land. This group of “leaders,” if that’s what you call them, become content to wander around aimlessly in the wilderness or, worse, lead the church back to Egypt. I am familiar with these possible responses because most of them, at various points and places in my ministry, have been a temptation crouching at the door of my heart.

Moses’ **holy humility** led him to fall “facedown” and while on his face he found the **godly grace** to get back up and lovingly intercede for and lead the people. I suppose that the best thing Christian leaders can do to help people move from Egypt to the Promised Land, in addition to developing a biblically-driven vision and strategy, is to model holy humility and godly grace through inevitable conflicts with the very people we have been called to lovingly lead. Our humility and grace in the heat of a leadership conflict may have a more potent impact on people than any sermon we ever preach. The leadership style of Moses may be contrary to the leadership style of a Machiavelli, a Donald Trump, or a Gordon Gekko, but it seems to be the way of the One who, with holy humility and godly grace, went to the cross in order to lead us out of our Egypt and into the Promised Land of His consistent, comforting, and confirming presence.

Works Cited

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