

Jethro: A Consultant for God

Exodus 18

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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When I drove onto the church campus last Tuesday, I glanced at the sign which contains today's sermon title. It read, "A Consultant for God," and directly underneath was my name, "Thomas A. Erickson." Some members of our staff saw it too, and they've been giving me a hard time ever since: "Tom Erickson, a consultant for God!"

On second thought, consultant may be a worthy addition to the list of labels we pastors wear. We are ministers, pastors, preachers, evangelists, teachers, administrators, and counselors. Why not consultants? A consultant is someone, anyone, who has helpful information or expertise to share. And by that definition there is not a person in this room who cannot be help to someone else. If you've done battle with cancer, you can assist someone who has just been diagnosed. If you've lost a loved one, you can walk with a widow through her grief. If you've pulled yourself up out of a business failure, you can put someone else's feet on the ladder to recovery. Whether or not others will listen to you, however, depends on how you share what you know. No one likes to be lectured or talked down to. So we need to learn the fine art of consultation, and Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, is a master from whom we can learn a great deal.

To begin with, Jethro himself lived under the counsel of God. The words "God" and "Lord" occur eighteen times in this chapter. God is at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of this text. So to Jethro, God is present not only on the Sabbath, one day out of seven; God is at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of every day of every week. God's word is the guidebook from which he takes his directions. Worship is the atmosphere from which he draws his strength. God is at the major reference point for his every action.

I try never to make a pastoral call without first breathing a prayer for guidance. If you think a minister always knows the right thing to say, I assure you that we too are often at a loss for words. We may some of the answers but we don't have all of them. So, like Jethro, we listen to God's Word, pray for God's help, and convey as best we can God's counsel. And I urge you to start your morning with coffee and Christ, with the stock market and the Scriptures, with your Palm Pilot and with prayer. Start every day under the counsel of God.

Secondly, Jethro listened patiently to what Moses had to say. "Each asked after the other's welfare," says our text, and "then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them." It must have taken a long time, but Jethro listened patiently to it all.

I've spoke before about the difference between hearing and listening, but this is one thing that bears repeating. Hearing records what another person says, but that's as far as it goes. Listening pays attention to the inflections, to the tone of voice, to the set of the lips and the eyes, to the color in the face and the lift of the eyebrows. Hearing registers meaning; listening absorbs the message. Hearing picks up the raw data; listening cares about the emotional background out of which that data emerges. You can hear what someone says while watching television or working at your computer. But you can listen, really listen, only when you turn and concentrate on the eyes and the mouth and the body language of the one who is speaking to you. So I need to come out from behind the morning paper when Carol asks me a question. And if your children are trying to get your attention, you need to hit the mute button even if the Orioles are threatening to score in the bottom of the ninth. We all need to cultivate the art of listening, lest we hear and not care when others need our counsel.

Thirdly, Jethro spoke out of deep concern for Moses' welfare. Moses was putting in fourteen-hour days, trying to be all things to all people. Well, no one knew as much about God as Moses knew. No one could

interpret the laws of God as expertly as Moses could. So people lined up in the morning and stood under the hot sun all day so they could share their burdens with the great man and glean from his wisdom. But at the age of eighty Moses simply could not put in those long hours without eventually suffering irreparable damage to his health. So Jethro spoke out of deep concern for Moses' welfare: "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone." Then, after devising a plan to delegate authority to trusted subordinates, Jethro concluded, "If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

Like many young pastors, I came out seminary with a messiah complex. The world needed saving and I was there to do it. But then I met a former minister who had suffered a heart attack in his early forties and was now out of the ministry for good. "Tom," he said, "I was told as a young man that I should burn out for God. Well, I burned out early, and now I can't do the ministry I was trained to do. Live for God," he told me. "Don't burn out." The other counsel came from Harold Ockenga, the pastor under whom I served in the early 60s. Harold always took Mondays off, and he insisted that we assistants also take a day off. In the summer he was gone for two months for study leave and vacation, and when I asked how he could leave a large, active church for so long a time, he replied, "The church belongs to God, not to me. The church was here long before I got here, and it will be here long after I'm gone. So when I leave on vacation, I leave the church in the hands of God." I've lived by that counsel for over forty years. I've worked hard and I've played well. And I'm thankful for two men who cared enough to remind that the world already has its Savior, and his name is not "Tom Erickson."

If you care deeply for another member of your family, or a colleague at work, or a friend making poor decisions, pray intentionally and search seriously for a way to offer that person good counsel. In Alcoholics Anonymous this is known as intervention. When someone is drinking too much, family members and trusted friends come together to confront the person caringly and lovingly with the truth as they see it. But whatever the issue, if you care, then dare to say what needs to be said. Be a caring consultant for God.

Finally, after giving his counsel, Jethro left it in Moses' hands. Jethro didn't force the issue, nor did he lose sleep over it. It was up to Moses to accept or reject Jethro's advice.

Jesus treated people in the same way. Jesus listened to their concerns, asked caring questions, gave wise counsel, and then backed off. When Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus and gave half his bank account to the poor, Jesus applauded. And when the rich young ruler rejected Jesus, the Savior grieved but spoke not a word of condemnation. Jesus never forced, never cajoled, never shamed anyone into making a decision they didn't want to make. Nor should we. You and I can be God's consultants, but we don't have God's power of attorney. So by all means share what you know, and then leave it in the other's hands.

If you haven't read *Tuesdays With Morrie*, resolve to do so before any more Tuesdays go by. When Mitch Albom discovers that his favorite professor, Morrie Schwartz, is dying of ALS, Lou Gerig's disease, he determines to visit him every Tuesday, even though that means flying to Boston from New York or some other part of the country. But it's worth it, Mitch finds, because visiting Morrie is a post-graduate course in courage. One Tuesday Morrie announced that he had decided what he wanted on his tombstone. Albom responds, "I don't want to hear about tombstones." "Why? They make you nervous?" I shrugged. "We can forget it." "No, go ahead, what did you decide?" Morrie popped his lips. "I was thinking of this: A Teacher to the Last." He waited while I absorbed it. "A Teacher to the Last." "Good?" he said. "Yes," I said. "Very good." Now, through Mitch Albom's sensitive writing, Morrie is still teaching.

You may not think of yourself as a teacher, but a teacher you are. By your example, if not by your words and your counsel, you are influencing scores of people every day. Resolve to be a worthy example. Resolve to be a caring consultant. Resolve to be one of God's Teachers -- to the Last.