

Healthy Leadership 7: Leadership Faces Resistance

Exodus 5:1-9

The Pathway to Healthy Leadership: Studies in Exodus on Moses as Leader

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I want to thank many of you for gathering yesterday in prayer. I want to thank many of you for praying for me the last two weeks. I continue to struggle with a virus that has taken away much of my energy. Prayer is an important reality for us to practice in the face of resistance. Let us pray together:

O, Lord, by the power of your Spirit, may your Holy Spirit be poured out upon us, that we would have strength that is from above to face the challenges that you have placed before us in life, that we might live out the good news of Jesus Christ in this world, say "NO" to evil and to say "YES" to the good life that you call us to. Now, may you speak to us in the truth and grace of who you are, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Harvard Business Review in June of 1990, John Cotter says what leaders really do. He contrasts management and leadership. He says management is about coping with complexity and leadership is about coping with change. In the leadership classic, *The Leadership Challenge* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, they say that leadership is about transformation. Change requires leadership.

Leadership is inextricably connected to the process of innovation. A leader has to rise to the point of seizing the initiative because leaders are called to make something new happen. Leaders challenge the status quo, and that leadership challenge is based upon a greater purpose, a higher power, a deeper meaning, a loftier goal, and a healthy pattern of life.

Moses was called by God to confront Pharaoh and to call for change. That famous line, repeated in centuries, "Let my people go," is about a call for change—change from the leadership of Pharaoh to the leadership of God. A change of culture... a change of place... a change of people... and a change of leader. "Let my people go into the wilderness, even for a three-day's journey," Moses said, "just a little bit of change. Pharaoh, you need to let go of control of the people that you oppress." "Release them," God said, "so I can embrace them. Pharaoh, you need to change."

It is not just the change of Pharaoh, but the change of the Egyptian culture—the whole pattern of organization—al leadership and style. The reason for the change is that God has called for it. That is the core of every good leader's change: it is because God has called for it.

God calls us for a universal purpose to change things for the better no matter where we work and have our responsibilities. Whether it be in family or business or government, military, the church, the club, the department, the office, the highway, the car or the airplane, we are called to practice a different pattern of life, to exercise the Grace of God, that is in goodness, love, and mercy, and to say no to the practices of evil that hurt people.

There is resistance to change. Even parents, when they take baptismal vows and bring their children into the life of the church, are committed to a pattern of leading their children through change--to announce and pronounce faith in Jesus Christ and to renounce evil and practices that will be hurtful in this world. The parent is committing himself and herself to be a model for a child of what it means to do well and not do evil. To raise a child is to say "NO" to behavior that hurts other human beings; to raise a child in positive ways is to live in the pattern of Jesus, the way Jesus lived.

Simple things like: we don't hit; we hug. We share; we don't grab control. We don't yell; we talk in kind words. We don't lie; we tell the truth. We are quiet in a sacred space. We don't sulk; instead, we find something else to do.

Moses and Aaron are called by God to take the leadership initiative to say "NO" to evil and "YES" to good. "Pharaoh, what you are doing to Israel is not good. Listen to the higher power, Yahweh. Let his people go even if it is only for a week holiday to worship out in the desert. Stop oppressing these people. Stop mistreating them and treating them like slaves and animals. Stop abusing them and reducing them to machines of work. Recognize their humanity. They hunger to know God. Understand that what you are doing to them is causing human misery.

When I was in the sixth grade, there were two sixth grade classes and there were two sixth grade teachers, Mrs. Burke and Mrs. Glenn; and every student knew which teacher they wanted to have. Mrs. Glenn was known as a person of grace and discipline. She kept order in her classroom, but she did it with a kind voice and a gentle spirit. However, Mrs. Burke was one who was known as a person of rage and anger. She used intimidation tactics to make sure things were done the right way in her class. There was no doubt on the school ground which teacher was beloved and which teacher was feared and hated. Even the parents began to complain about Mrs. Burke, and so over a period of time, there was a movement to resist her leadership on the school ground that embraced Mrs. Glenn. Fortunately, for me, I was in Mrs. Glenn's sixth-grade class and not in Mrs. Burke's sixth-grade class. Eventually, the principal said "NO" to Mrs. Burke, and "YES" to Mrs. Glenn.

The leadership responsibility of each one of us is to say "NO" to behavior patterns that hurt other people. But there is resistance to this. After all, Pharaoh does not roll over and play dead. He says, "Who am I that I should listen to this God; I don't know this God. Why should I let those people go when they do a lot of work for me that is important to the success of this nation?" There is resistance to change at several levels in this text. There is the macro-level of resistance organizationally, from the top down. Pharaoh says, "No, I will not change. I will not let the people go." There is resistance at the junior management level with the slave drivers and the foremen--the Egyptian slave drivers beat the Israeli foremen. They continue to manipulate and collaborate to get the slave work done.

And there is inner resistance on the part of Moses himself, who still carries those haunting questions of: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Who am I when I don't speak all that well? I could fail, and what if God cannot do what God says?"

It is the resistance often at the middle level from little pharaohs that often cause the most pain. The people who have been abused by higher powers and take that abuse and turn it on in their own and abuse others--the foremen in this case, those who were a part of Israel but were coercing their own people in abusive ways. Elie Wiesel, in the Nobel prize-winning book, *Night*, tells about the example of the *Pipels* in the German concentration camps--little boys who had been abused by the leadership of Nazi Germany. The bosses of the camps often became the most abusive leaders to their young boys. He tells about the story of a boy of 13, when he saw that his father was not making his bed properly, turned to his father in anger and said, as the old man wept, "Make your bed. If you don't stop crying instantly, I will no longer bring you bread. Understood?" Sometimes the resistance happens because people have been beaten up in the middle of the system, and they turn and beat up others.

In my time in Washington, D.C., I have experienced a number of people who have been beaten up by the system and have learned to turn and beat up others along the way. They tend to become abusive because they have been abused.

Resistance is a part of what happens when we are doing the wrong thing and that the wrong things seems to settle into a pattern of life that causes some people to be very happy with the power that they have, even at the cost of oppressing others.

Why do we resist positive change? Because we have a lot to lose if we are in power. We have power, authority and position. If this change happens, we will not have that same power, authority and position. We don't want to give up control. We fear what we don't see. We know this leader who is called Pharaoh but we don't know who this God is; and we don't know if this God is able to work the way that God says he can. As bad as it is, it could be worse if we change. We like the status quo; it's working for us. Things could get worse after all if we start changing things. And, guess what? That is the point of the text.

When Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, things do get worse. It doesn't become easier for the people, or the slave driver, or the foremen; it becomes tougher. Pharaoh says: "Tell those people to make bricks without straw." They are going to have to go find their own straw. Life will get tougher. Be harder on them. Beat them. Abuse them even more.

Why do we resist change? Because if the change happens, we will lose something important to us. I was talking, not long ago, with an elder from another large Presbyterian church in this country who had just called a new pastor. I said to this elder, "I hear great things about your new pastor." No expression, no response. Then a quiet response: "I miss the last pastor. He was my only model for a good pastor." "But," I said, "Your new pastor is one of the best and the brightest we have in the denomination." "Well," he said, "I think we've made a mistake. I wish we could go back to the last one."

Why do we resist change? Because the change will call forth something within us to make us give up something of value that we want to hold on to, even if it is not the best thing.

And what is the key to facing this resistance as a leader? What model do we see in Moses' life? The first pattern is that Moses continually goes back and engages God face to face. There is no way to be a leader and face ongoing resistance to the right thing unless we spend a lot of time in the presence of God, for God is the center of who we are and who we are called to become. Talking with God, complaining to God, remembering the call, conversing and rehearsing the mantra of leadership: "Let my people go. Make the change happen, God. It's up to you to do it."

The second pattern is in this model of Moses with Pharaoh— persistence. In the face of resistance, commit yourself to persist—to repeat, to be a broken record, to stand and be assertive in the face of resistance, and not to back down. "Let my people go," Moses says; and Pharaoh says, "No." And he goes back and says again, "Now let us take a three-day journey." And he comes back over, and over, and over again as Pharaoh's heart is hardened. The key to facing resistance is about being in the presence of God and persisting with the request—because only God can change things from worse to better.

In the third pattern of Moses with Pharaoh and others who resist evil in the face of change, you will notice that there is no action on Moses' or Aaron's part to engage in hurtful and vindictive behavior. They do not give-in to temptation to do what evil does, to begin to abuse those who abuse them. They say "NO" to that temptation. Instead, you will find over and over in the next few chapters, that Moses' prays for Pharaoh even when Pharaoh resists. It is, in fact, this assertive pattern of committed behavior in the face of resistance that begins to change what happens.

Edward Friedman, in his book, *Reinventing Leadership*, talks about the model of Abraham Lincoln who understood, as we have heard from Dr. Ron White a number of times in this church, that Lincoln was committed to a pattern of imitating the very nature of God in biblical expression so that when he led the United States of America to unity, he did so because it was this pattern of the very nature of God. And Friedman says, "Lincoln refused to be sabotaged because he was committed to a higher call." Lincoln was willing even to use force to keep the higher purpose of the Union together and to have the slaves emancipated, even in the face of resistance of some states.

Leaders must face resistance and say "NO" to divisiveness in a search to do the right thing. This is the why people like Moses, and Jesus, and Ghandi, and Martin Luther King have practiced assertive, nonviolent resistance—to say "YES" to the way of God and to say "NO" to the temptation to do damage.

I was talking to a nurse, not too many weeks ago, who had a supervisor who continually used abusive language and an abusive tone toward those who worked for her. The nurses and the aides working in the department were worn down by this person who continually came at them with an oppressive disposition. The nurse said, "I'm tempted to become passive aggressive, to go around her and to undermine her. I'm tempted to become aggressive and over-reactive, and just "tell her off." But somehow in the grace of God, she heard the call of Jesus how to face resistance. And she said: What I'm called to do is to speak the truth in love; to say "NO" to the pattern that's causing damage; and "YES, you can do it differently if you desire." And over a period of time of a broken-record approach to assertive challenge, the supervisor

decided that she was no longer fit to lead the department.

There was a secretary who worked in my office at one time with an office manager who consistently abused her with bad language and a bad temper. She came to me one day, and said, "I will not take this anymore. I want to say "NO, this is not acceptable." She resisted the abuse, and she asked me to stand with her in that. Finally, the supervisor got the message and decided that it was time for him to retire because he had given over to anger and darkness in his own soul and had hurt too many people.

Jesus himself faced resistance. Jesus faced the scribes, the chief priests, and the Pharisees; and he refused to be moved by their negative pattern of life. In Matthew chapter 23, we see Jesus willing to confront them and speak the truth to them, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you shut the Kingdom of Heaven out in people's faces. You are disciples of Hell. You are blind guides. You have people swear by things rather than swear by their own integrity. You are hypocrites. You look clean on the outside, but you are evil on the inside." Jesus resisted the resistance of the Pharisees.

Yes, I understand that all change isn't good, but change that is called for in the very nature of God to make this world a better place, to make your family a better place to live--change that is measured by the very stature of Jesus himself, is the kind of change that we are called to implement as leaders in the faith. Jesus himself said, "Become perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Become complete and mature. Be changed and transformed by the pattern of who God is. Don't stay in the status quo.

And Paul took up this same theme by saying, "Don't be conformed to this world; be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is good, acceptable, and right, perfect and complete." Paul also said, in Ephesians, "We must no longer be children tossed around by every fad of doctrine, by people's trickery and by their craftiness and deceitful scheming but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Jesus Christ. And in Romans chapter 12, Paul summarizes all this by saying, "We need to resist those who would do evil by doing good. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another. Honor one another above yourselves. Keep your spiritual fervor and purpose and serve the Lord and not others. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful to prayer; share with God's people in need who are oppressed and practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Be willing to associate with people of less position and don't be conceited. Do not repay evil with evil. Do not take revenge. If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If your enemy is thirsty, then give him something to drink."

How do we resist evil? How do we resist the patterns that are doing damage in this world? By continuing to practice the healthy patterns of Jesus Christ—the very presence of God in this world.

Now, I end this with just one simple question for myself and for you: Are you resisting the change that Christ would like to bring into your life, to your style of leadership... to your presence and pattern in organizations... and to your family—or are you holding back? Are you unwilling to let go? Have you kept yourself locked up and enslaved in your own view of reality? Are you willing to be transformed? Or are you more like Pharaoh than Moses?

Let us pray. O, Lord Jesus Christ, may you transform us by the renewing of your power, the Word that you speak to us in Scripture, the presence of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. May you move us to become people who initiate positive change in the pattern of Moses and Jesus; in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.