

Healthy Leadership 10: The Piracy of God

[Exodus 3:20-22; 11:1-3; 12:33-36](#)

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

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As we've heard this morning, a unique text in Exodus is repeated three times. When, in Scripture, something is said once – let's pay attention to it. When it's said twice, let's pay special attention. When it's said three times – it is very important for us to see:

Initiated by the leadership of God, through grace; proclaimed through the leadership of Moses to the people; acted on by the people of Israel – they simply asked the Egyptians to give them all of their money. And they did. God did the unthinkable... God did the unanticipated... the unexpected... the unimaginable. God moved the wealthy of Egypt to see Israel with favor and give them a huge amount of wealth before they left Egypt. And so, it says in the text (in a surprising way): "The Israelites plundered the Egyptians..." They left with all the dough—both kinds.

Let us pray. O Lord, now may you move in our hearts to soften us – that we might receive your Word. And as you even moved Egypt, you will move us to be the kind of people you've called us to be. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Plunder is a strong word; even a harsh word. It may sound like hyperbole, but it is asserted twice in these three texts: that God made Israel do "plunder" to Egypt. Plunder is an action of pirates. Victorious ancient armies plundered the people they conquered. It literally means, in Hebrew, "to rip another group of people off;" to "strip away the wealth of the enemy." But it also means, in a special way, "to rescue that which one owns already;" "to take what is rightfully yours;" "to remove your wealth from an oppressor;" "to settle accounts" and "to reckon things right."

The metaphor of Robin Hood is very appropriate here. According to the historical myth, sometime around the reign of Richard the Lion Heart, during the 12th to 14th centuries, a gifted archer and charismatic leader, committed to justice and the redistribution of wealth, recognized that ordinary people were being abused by government and by the church. He decided to return the favor: Robin Hood gathered his merry men to rob the rich and give the wealth to the poor.

Taking from the rich and giving to the poor...taking from the arrogant and giving to the humble...taking from the grabbing-hands and giving to the empty-handed... this is what God does here, and throughout history. God takes the lead; God acts; God intervenes. God becomes a "pirate" to those who are guilty of piracy— those who have oppressed through harshness and hardness.

God says, "I will stretch out my hand and I will strike Egypt. I will perform wonders. I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh."

God takes the initiative: "Tell the people, before they leave Egypt, to ask their neighbors for jewelry, silver, gold, and fine clothes."

The Lord took the initiative to enact both grace and mercy in strange ways... "I will bring these people (my people) into such favor with the Egyptians, that when you go, you will not go empty-handed." And so the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and the Egyptians let the slaves of Israel have what they requested.

And so Israel plundered Egypt. An act of judgment... a great reversal of fortune... an act of transforming the hearts of people who had been hardened. According to the Scripture, it is a great act of 'benevolent piracy;' a great act of plundering people who had made their wealth on the backs of Israel's slaves for

hundreds of years.

This past week, at Wednesday Night Alive, we looked at this text and it received some skepticism and even cynicism from some of the people reading it: Can it be so? God isn't a robber; God isn't a 'pirate.' How could God lead his people to plunder the Egyptians? Isn't that a bit harsh? After all, isn't God a God of grace?

I think the wonderful irony of this text is that God uses the grace that God pours out upon the people, to move Egypt to give away their wealth: grace leads to the action of plundering. God softens the hearts of the Egyptians to have favor toward the slaves of the Pharaoh. God moved an entire nation of people to give up their wealth and give it to the poor, and send them on their way.

Now albeit, that God's grace also garnered fear (as we read) among the Egyptian people, for they said: "If you stay with us, we may all be dead." So please go. Grace works in mysterious ways; and sometimes in severe, merciful ways.

It was grace that made this great act of plunder an act of righteousness. And how can the grace of God lead to 'piracy?' The wealthy Egyptians, after all, are left poor... and Israel, who is poor, is sent away wealthy. I believe it's 'payback' time: all of those unpaid back wages...all of those withheld checks...all of that abuse by the Egyptian slave drivers...all of the beatings... all of the scars. Now the Great Judge has settled the accounts—while Egypt is decimated, Israel is restored to the wealth that they had in Egypt when Joseph ruled.

It's a great reversal... and it's a great irony: the poor slaves, who have no way to get wealth... but it is the grace of their enemies that gives them wealth. They could not force the Egyptians' hearts to be changed. They could not demand the money. They could not even use coercion or manipulation to get the money. All they had to do was ask.

Everyone knows it's normally malevolence that leads to robbery... piracy... pillaging... and plundering. But all Israel had to do was ask. Because only God can change peoples' hearts from the inside out. Only God can turn enemies into neighbors. Only God can move wealthy people to give to the poor. Only God can make the poor wealthy. Only God can plunder the rich with grace and give them the willingness to become poor, for God's sake. This is a sign of God's mighty act of salvation: when the rich are moved to give away their wealth to the poor. And according to the Old Testament, and to Jesus, all we have to do is ask. As Jesus taught, "Ask and it shall be given. Knock and the door shall be opened."

We call our financial support here at the National Presbyterian Church—in ministry and mission— "faith-giving" because it is motivated by grace—not by some duty... or by some fee... or by some cost that is imposed. We know that we can't coerce one another; manipulate one another; intimidate one another; demand of one another. We can only appeal. We can only ask. We can only appeal to how God's grace has moved your faith.

And what did Israel do with much of the wealth that Egypt gave to them? They spent it on a church facility (another irony of the text.) Later on, in Exodus, we see that they funded the Tabernacle. Only God can fund a future mobile home... the Tabernacle—the presence of God... with the wealth of Egypt. They gave an offering in the wilderness, of the wealth that God had poured out to them, from Egypt—to build and maintain a mobile facility: a tabernacle where God would dwell of worship and prayer. They built a tabernacle where God would dwell with them as they walked through the wilderness. The wealth that built God's house was the plundered wealth of Egypt.

It is God who must move us to give. It is God who must move you to have favor toward ministry and mission in this faith community—to give. For it is God, in grace, who has given you the wealth to be able to, in fact, give it to others.

Sometimes we don't ask for this...and God still gives. This is what happened with a woman by the name of Marjorie Freund, who, a few years back gave The National Presbyterian Church \$2.7 million. She was not a Protestant; she was not a member of this church; a few people of this church knew her and loved her.

Harry Winsheimer was able visit her in the retirement home a couple of times. But somehow, by God's grace, she was moved to give \$2.7 million to the church. Our trustees and elders heard the call of God to set that money aside to make sure we can take care of this building; and today, we repair the heating and air conditioning systems of the sanctuary and chapel because we have that money. We're able to replace the elevator because we have that money. We could say that God's grace 'pirated' Ms. Freund's money away... and put it into the hands of God's people, who don't have the money to repair the building. It is her voluntary and unexpected gift that is, in fact, paying for much of our repair.

But sometimes we even ask in round-about ways. I received a note this past summer from a friend of The National Presbyterian Church...

Dear Dr. Icenogle I hope this note finds you well. We have not met, and actually my wife and I are not even members of your church (we hope to be someday). My work has kept me from attending any church recently... I finally had a chance to catch up on your past sermons and was especially moved by the sermon from July 22 and immediately asked my wife to listen to it. We also read your newsletter regarding the church finances. We both felt compelled by your sermon and have enclosed a check. We understand it's not enough to cover the deficit; but we hope some needed repairs can be made and some services can be maintained at the church. No dollar amount can ever equate to the amount of grace and salvation we feel through Christ through your church. This is just a small token our appreciation, and we hope to contribute more regularly. Thank you for presiding over such a wonderful church!

The check was for \$100,000.

This past week, I received a note from another member who said, "Please use this extra \$1,000 to make up the deficit at NPC."

It is God who moves people, not us; it is God who moves both members and non-members; friends and neighbors. God led my wife and me, this past year, to increase our giving significantly to NPC to make up the financial deficit. And God has moved many of you to do the same.

So today I believe that the word from God is clear: to invite us today to join the gracious piracy of God by sharing our wealth, because we are moved to have favor toward this ministry and this mission of Jesus Christ, here at NPC. Allow God to plunder the money out of your hand and put it in God's hand. Consider the full extent of what God is calling you to give—not because you must... but because you have been touched by God's grace. If God can move pagan Egypt to give away their wealth, God can move us even more, who believe in Jesus Christ.

But there was also an opposite reaction to Israel's grace and the movement of God through Israel. There was the movement of Pharaoh himself—who, rather than having his heart softened, as the days went by... through the tumult of the plagues and the changes... hardened his heart each time something happened. Some of us, because of hurt and anger, tighten up rather than loosen up. We hold back rather than let go of our wealth. We, like Pharaoh, think we can shut ourselves off from the grace of God. We even think we can be God and make those decisions for ourselves.

Sometimes, over the years of faith that has been lost or forgotten, we turn neutral and cold toward God in the call to generosity. Deep inside, we are often angry with God... angry with the church... angry with the leadership... or with our spouse. Our hardness holds us back from giving what God has given to us. The prophet Malachi identifies those who have been hardened as "robbing" God—trying to pirate away what we owe to God.

God said to these, among the people who refuse grace: 'You are robbing me. Bring your full offering, not just a token. Rethink what you are doing and respond well to my grace. See, all the things that I have done for you?'

This giving of wealth to do ministry and mission is all about the grace of God in Jesus Christ—as it shines through the mission and ministry of this church. So let us give with soft hearts, moved by grace. Let us give in unity, and together, as community. Let us give together—and not in isolation. Let us give in

generosity—and not in scarcity.

As the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians to persuade them to give: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor—so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

May God move us to that kind of extreme generosity. That may seem to some to be piracy on the high seas... or highway robbery. But, in reality it's an extravagant demonstration of what only God can do—showing us the expensive sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, himself—because grace needs to give.

Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, now move us by the power of your Word, through the presence of your Holy Spirit and the leadership of Jesus—to act upon the grace that you have shown to us, and become a people of generous hearts. Let us give, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.