

Leadership Part II

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“...Moses answered, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the people of God were prophets! If *Yahweh* would bestow the Spirit on them all!’” — Numbers 11:29.

I have said this here before but not in some time. This topic came to mind because of a discussion with a colleague last week.

When I offer pre-marital counseling one question I always try to ask is quite basic. ‘When does the marriage happen?’ Simple question? No, it’s not. It is complex.

I am happy to report no couple has ever given me an answer like this: “Didn’t we tell you? The marriage will be on Saturday, October the 6th at 2:00 p.m.”

The real answer is, indeed, not simple. But it is obvious. Marriage happens when the covenant commitment is made among— note, not between which would be two parties but among, meaning three parties— marriage happens when the covenant commitment is made among the two people and God. This is a three way covenant.

That covenant commitment could have happened a long time before the actual ceremony. But equally, that covenant commitment might not have yet happened, might not happen for years. The only thing I’d be willing to bet on is that it’s unlikely the ceremony commonly known as a wedding will entice it to happen.

So, what is the ceremony about? After all, in our culture it does seem to carry great importance. The ceremony is about gathering family and friends and inviting their blessing and the blessing of God.

Indeed, these rituals of passage are important markers in our life. So to say the marriage happens when the commitment to covenant becomes realized in no way diminishes the ceremony which carries its own importance. But the ceremony is not the covenant.

That having been said, this question about when the marriage happens and the answer about covenant commitment among the two people and God is a very, very complex concept. Why? Well, what is covenant commitment?

Covenant commitment is a commitment to growth— all kinds of growth— growth in learning, growth in spirit, growth in wisdom, growth in... love. Most of all it is a commitment to growth before God, with God, through God, in companionship with God and with another person.

I hope it’s obvious there are many complexities to this concept of covenant growth. It raises many questions. For example, what happens when one person in the covenant in some way— mentally or physically— is not able to grow? What happens when one person in covenant in some way simply refuses to grow.

You will be relieved to know I am not going to tackle those questions since my comments might last a couple of hours. I am not going there because I think this reading leads us to consider another area of covenant.

That aspect is not the human involvement, per se. The aspect I want to consider asks the question ‘Where is God in the covenant?’ (Slight pause.)

These words are found in the work known as Numbers: “...Moses answered, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? If

only all the people of God were prophets! If *Yahweh* would bestow the Spirit on them all!” (Slight pause.)

The Israelites think of Moses as their leader. Why not? Moses is charismatic. In Greek the word charisma means “gift.” Moses is gifted.

Moses seems to be filled with the Spirit of God, speaks with God face to face, speaks for God to the community, intercedes on behalf of the people. Leadership is embedded in this story and it cannot be read independently of it.

But what happens? Eventually complaints happen. At the beginning of this reading it’s complaints about food. At the end it’s about people other than those assigned prophesying.

Equally in terms of the entire story, the community had its formation experience under the leadership of Moses with the events at Sinai. But now the story of this community has entered a different phase— a wilderness phase, a wilderness experience.

And so when and where does this conflict, this complaining happen? It happens in the wilderness. Perhaps the charisma of Moses has lost some of it’s gleam. Perhaps the people are puzzled, confused, lost.

Questions are raised: where are we going? Who got us here? Whose fault was this? Who is in charge? Let’s blame someone.

Moses is a convenient target. Even Moses complains. But Moses complains to God. (Slight pause.)

Earlier I asked the question ‘Where is God in the covenant?’ I want to suggest in complaining to God Moses has it right. And, as if Moses needed to do this yet again, the prophet proves leadership ability. How? Moses listens to God.

And where *is* God in the covenant? What *does* Moses hear? (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest Moses hears *is* God is present. But I also want to suggest Moses hears not just that God is present. Moses hears God seeks to be present for everyone.

The next thing I want to say is we need to be, like Moses, listening to God. And we need to be, like Moses, confident God is there for us, present to us, for us, with us.

Please note: I am not addressing results. Being confident God is there for us, present to us, with us, is not the same as having an expectation about results. It is simply being in the moment, living in the moment with God.

And that is what Moses did. That is, in fact, what leadership in a community of faith really means for we humans. Leadership is not about figuring out what program we need or designing or planning.

Leadership in a community of faith is about asking a key question. To where is God calling the entire community of faith? If leadership fails to ask to where is God calling the community of faith, programs, designing and planning will not matter.

Indeed, programs, designing, planning may turn out to be quite successful in human terms. But does success in human terms fulfill being in covenant with God if God is not really on board with our programs, our designing, our planning? (Slight pause.)

Óscar Romero was a Catholic Archbishop in El Salvador. He was assassinated while offering Mass. This is a quote from Romero: “A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a Gospel that unsettles, proclaims a Word that fails to get under anyone’s skin, a Word that fails to touch the real brokenness of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what kind of Gospel is that church preaching?” (Slight pause.)

To where is God calling the community of faith? Where *is* God? (Slight pause.)

I think Romero has it right. God always calls the community of faith to be provocative, unsettling in our society, even among the people, even in the congregation God has gathered.

Equally, I think this reading, itself, tells us two very important things. First leaders, no matter how charismatic, can only take a community so far. Second, while everyone in a community of faith is not called to leadership stations, leadership provided by a sole individual does not work in the long run.

After all, look around at churches in our own society led by charismatic leaders. What happens when that leader dies or leaves? Most often the community crumbles. If that’s the case were that church really a community of faith? Was it a church in name only? Were they simply a group with a charismatic leader?

Ideally, to be a church, to be a congregation, the whole community of faith needs to be involved. The whole community of faith needs to have voice. (Slight pause.)

That brings up two other points. First yes, it is the work of every person in the community of faith to listen for and listen to God. But equally it is the work of every person in the community of faith to be confident that God is there for us, present to us, for us, with us.

And for what are we listening? I believe we should not be listening for programs or designing or planning. It is the work of every person in the community of faith to be listening for the God of covenant who calls us to be committed to covenant growth— growth in learning, growth in spirit, growth in wisdom, growth in... love.

I also believe, as Archbishop Romero suggested, within that covenant we are called to do the work of God, the will of God. And that work is to preach the Gospel.

From what I hear the Gospel always provokes, unsettles, gets under the skin identifies the real brokenness of society. I would also suggest the real brokenness of society is that it has never been a place where everyone feels loved, wanted, protected, encouraged to grow.

And that my friends is the call of the Gospel. Everyone needs to feel loved, wanted, protected, encouraged to grow. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Please do me a favor and turn to the *Call to Worship* in the bulletin and find the sentence which reads, “Let the Glory of God abide in this place.” You will notice the word Glory is capitalized. That is not a typographical error. The word glory appears many times in the Hebrew Scriptures. The underlying Hebrew word is *Kabod*. *Kabod* indicates the reality of the real presence of God and that’s why glory is capitalized. So indeed, as a congregation, as a community of faith, let us commit to covenant growth and recognize the reality of the real presence of God.”

BENEDICTION: We are called to care in a world which can be uncaring, commissioned as lovers among some who may offer back indifference. Know this: God is with us in all our days. So, let us go forth knowing that the grace of God is deeper than our imagination, the strength of Christ is stronger than our need and the communion of the Holy Spirit is richer than all our togetherness. May God guide and sustain us today and in all our tomorrows. Amen.