

## “Why Do You Sit Alone?”

Exodus 18:5-6, 13-24

1 Corinthians 3:3b-10

### I. Introduction - Elana

A little over ten years ago, Lucus and I were approaching our wedding date. He was in New Mexico in his first call, I was in Louisville for my last year of seminary, and, naturally, we were getting married in North Carolina (an oh-so-convenient location, given all the variables). We did everything we could ahead of time. We would spend the week before the wedding in North Carolina settling the last few details.

In my dreaming and planning, I had thought it would be delightful to have hot tea as a table favor for guests. We chose four different loose-leaf teas for (I dunno) a hundred and fifty people? We had the tea on hand, the empty tea bags, even the lovely labels that Lucus printed out, but... <sigh> By that week... we had a thing or two going on! And despite our best intentions that Lucus and I would plan everything together, by that time, I was sitting alone atop a pile of spreadsheets and Word docs wondering how everything would get done.

Stressed and exhausted, we got to Beth and Chuck's hotel room when what to our wondering eyes did appear? I kid you not – it was an assembly line for tea bags. Chuck had been sent to buy a stapler that housed the tiniest staples I've ever seen. Beth innovated the perfect tea bag fold that was quite secure and looked just right. If I remember correctly, they were over halfway done by the time we showed up.

### II. Jethro/Moses - Elana

I was touched by their willingness to jump right in and do what they could to help. It was somewhat more gracious than Jethro's approach of visiting his son-in-law, following him to work, and criticizing his leadership. “What this that you are doing...? Why do you sit alone,

while all the people are standing around you from morning until evening?” In Moses’s defense, it hadn’t been that long since they had crossed the Red Sea, had their first taste of manna, and drunk miraculous water. Still, Jethro straight up says, “What you are doing isn’t good.” You’re going to wear yourself out if you keep going like this. You will end up exhausted, feeling empty, and acting like a fool if you don’t remember to look. Look at the people that you are leading! There are capable people in that bunch!

This word “capable” is *chayil* in Hebrew and it’s one of my favorite words. It has this sense of abounding capacity – in goods or troops, in resources or virtue. It could mean well-supplied, energetic, good, even courageous! You are so busy sitting alone – why not look for the many expressions of *chayil* around you?

### III. Jethro/Moses – Lucus

So, Jethro tells Moses to look for capable, valorous people. That’s collaborative leadership – delegation, even! And here’s what to look for: Reverence. Bravery. Energy. Truthfulness. And resistance to bribery. That’s a pretty good list for leading people, whether through the wilderness of the Sinai or through life in these United States. Great! And more to the point, by working together, by sharing the burden amongst all – well, it lightens the burden substantially. Moses, it turns out, isn’t sitting alone – he’s part of a larger community, who together can accomplish more than if Moses had to carry everything himself.

Then, after offering all this wisdom to Moses and the Hebrew People – I love that Jethro’s like, “Y’all have fun on your journey – I’m heading back to Midian.” He gives advice and heads back to the life he knows best. This is another way of showing Moses that he’s not alone – he’s got connections in Midian, through his in-laws and their extended family.

### IV. Paul/Apollos - Lucus

Now, if we turn our attention to our second scripture passage today, we see a different sort of example of collaborative leadership. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, which he helped found, but is now experiencing in-fighting. (Yep, we've moved from in-laws to in-fighting!) The church members are dividing into factions and quarrelling with each other. Some are saying that they're with Paul, and others with Apollos.<sup>1</sup> When Paul writes to them, he's saying, "Whether you say you're for Paul or you're for Apollos, you're missing the point! It's not about the messenger, it's about the message itself!" It's not a competition. You don't have to listen to Paul alone, or Apollos alone. Both are great and are needed!

Paul goes on to encourage the idea of interdependency – offering two different, wonderful metaphors for collaboration. First is the idea of one person planting a seed, another person watering the field – but that it is God that causes the plant to grow. Everything is God's – from the acorn to the oak, to the water, to the sun. But the people that bring those needed things – the messengers, the leaders – they are part of God's overall plan. "We are God's co-workers – you are God's field." Together, all of us live and grow in the space that God has planted us.

Cool! But that still can sound a bit braggy, like, Paul and Apollos are somehow better than the congregation. So, he takes another tack, another metaphor. "I laid the foundation like a wise builder, according to God's grace that was given to me. Now someone else is building on it. Each person needs to choose the way they build on it carefully." Everyone adds something unique to the structure, as we work to discern the shape of God's blueprints. What's so cool about people, about organic things, is that we grow with our individual uniqueness. Even identical twins are different – how much more so those of us from opposite sides of the planet. And the building we build together is astounding – it is absolutely beautiful, with each of us

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<sup>1</sup> whom Acts describes as an incredible orator.

bringing our own perspectives to the structure that God designed. Sometimes, we remodel. Sometimes, we trip over something we didn't expect. But we are absolutely all helping to build the building together.

Collaborative leadership, then, is about identifying how our structures attach to the master plan. Seeing the gifts that we all bring, and applying them where they are most needed. Through it all, we trust that God will cause us to grow together, hiding or showing the seams as fits God's plan.

#### V. Paul/Apollos – Elana

This is all easier said than done because we're capable of different things. There are so many choices we could make – in life, in ministry. Wherever we are, we can try to hide from the sun or soak it up when it's needed. We could hoard water and drown our roots or let it flow and trust that God will give rain if the waterer fails. We could buy cheap materials and pocket the money, but the building will show its flaws.

If we look and listen, we may find different opportunities. Say I'm corn. I'll do alright being in a cornfield and growing up to the sun. But, if I am corn and I find myself planted with beans and squash, it's a whole new game. Now I have friends who can stand where I am weak. I can stand in ways I never imagined when they need it. We can choose to embrace one another or not. Why we are planted where we are may be a mystery, but we are watered by saints we never knew. We are shoulder to shoulder with our family. And God is giving the growth.

#### VI. Oneness (Lucas)

We began this sermon with the question Jethro asks Moses – “Why do you sit alone?” And, as it turned out, Moses wasn't alone. He was connected with others, and together, they were one. Just as we are: one in purpose – to follow God faithfully. One in faith – to trust in God's

promises. One in sharing God's love, for all are God's chosen family. Paul re-emphasized this, reminding the church in Corinth that they, too, are one. One in the field. One in the house. One in their love of Christ, no matter their preferred messenger.

Perhaps we could ask the question a bit differently – not, “why do you sit alone?” but “how are we all one?”<sup>2</sup> We are all growing in the field in which we have been planted, expressing ourselves as part of a diverse, beautiful community that is stronger for our reliance on each other. We all build a piece of the great mansion that God designed for us, individual and yet connected. We are all a part of the body of Christ, called to use our gifts to benefit all of us together.

May we live into the field where we are called by God. May the Spirit guide our lives as we construct the path ahead. And may the love of Christ suffuse us completely, that we realize we are all one in him. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> And it turns out, the word “alone” was originally a compound word, containing “all one” within it. Yes, the sense was, “wholly and completely singular” – but it’s fascinating to think that we are always part of something greater than ourselves.