

Equipped not Exhausted

God's people were never meant to carry the holy work alone.

Sermon for the Opening Worship of the 2026 Synod Assembly

Exodus 18:13-27

Rev. Constanze Hagmaier

Bishop, South Dakota Synod, ELCA

Sometimes grace arrives as an in-law, with luggage in one hand and an observation no one asked for in the other.

Scripture does not tell us whether Moses panic-cleaned the tent before Jethro arrived, Marie Kondo-ing the wilderness, hoping his father-in-law would find only things that sparked joy.

But Jethro comes anyway.

And he sees what panic-cleaning cannot hide.

I will say this honestly and lovingly: my mother-in-law and I had to grow to love each other. That is the truth. But over time, I came to treasure something about her. She could open my refrigerator, look at what I thought were scrappy leftovers, and somehow make something remarkable.

She could see possibilities where I mostly saw odds and ends.

And I wonder if that is part of what Jethro does in Exodus 18. He arrives from the outside. He listens to the stories. He hears about God's deliverance, mercy, power, and faithfulness. He hears how the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, through the sea, through danger, through hunger, through thirst, through the wilderness.

And Jethro rejoices.

Before he ever critiques anything, he worships. Before he ever says, "What you are doing is not good," he first says, "Blessed be the Lord."

That matters.

Because this sermon does not begin with everything that is wrong with the church. It begins with gratitude.

There is much to bless God for.

There are stories of faithfulness all across this synod. There are congregations still gathering around Word and Sacrament. There are children being baptized, elders being visited, grieving families being held, hungry neighbors being fed, young leaders being formed, communities being served, and the Gospel still being spoken in places where people need a word larger than their fear.

There is much to bless God for.

And because there is so much holy work, we have to tell the truth about how we are carrying it.

Because the next day, after the stories have been told, after the meal has been shared, after the worship and rejoicing, Moses goes back to work.

Enough slacking off.

There are disputes to settle. Questions to answer. Decisions to make. People are waiting.

From morning until evening, Moses sits, and the people stand. One by one. Case by case. Need by need. Conflict by conflict.

I imagine the line getting longer. I imagine the patience getting shorter. Kinda like when you call your provider and hear, "You are caller number 475 in line." I imagine someone near the back saying, "Do you think he'll ever get to us?" And the reason you called in the first place is that it is important. Same with the people standing in line that day, every day.

What they had to bring to Moses was important.

That is part of the problem. The needs were real. The questions mattered. The conflicts mattered. The people mattered.

The problem was not that Moses did not care.

The problem was that Moses cared so much that he did not notice the system was crushing him and underusing them.

Jethro watches this from morning until evening. And finally, he asks the question outsiders sometimes ask before insiders are ready to hear it:

"What are you doing?"

"Why are you sitting alone?"

"Why are all the people standing around you from morning until evening?"

Why is the life of these people organized in this way?

I wonder who the Jethros are for the church today.

Who are the ones standing near enough to care, but far enough away to see? Who are the ones asking us, not with hostility but with love, "What are you doing?"

Sometimes they are younger leaders.

Sometimes, they are people who left and still love the church enough to tell the truth.

Sometimes they are global companions who remind us that accompaniment is not giving people fish forever, but learning together how to fish, how to lead, how to share the holy work.

Sometimes they are our neighbors, wondering why a church with such good news seems so tired.

And then Jethro says the thing.

"What you are doing is not good."

That word "good" should make our ears perk up. In Genesis, God looks at creation and calls it good. Again and again, God calls creation good.

But here, Jethro looks at how God's delivered people are organized and says, "This is not good."

Not because Moses is not good.

Not because the people are not good.

Not because the work is not good.

But because a system that exhausts the called and keeps the people waiting is not the goodness God intends.

And dear synod, we know something about this.

We have sometimes organized the church around exhaustion and called it faithfulness.

We have sometimes praised over-functioning as dedication.

We have sometimes let pastors carry what belongs to the whole body.

We have sometimes let councils believe they are alone.

We have sometimes let synod staff become the place where every anxiety, every question, every conflict, and every hope is supposed to land and be fixed.

And we have sometimes loved our people so much, served them so hard, and protected the work so carefully, that we accidentally pastored the church out of the priesthood of all believers.

But hear this clearly: God refuses exhaustion.

God doesn't refuse us.

God refuses exhaustion that keeps us from becoming who we are in Christ.

God is against the patterns that make one person carry what belongs to the body.

God opposes habits that leave the baptized waiting in line for ministry rather than being equipped for it.

The people standing in line are not only a burden to Moses.

They are also being underused.

They are waiting for ministry instead of being equipped for ministry.

And so, Jethro gives Moses advice.

He does not attack Moses' character. He does not say Moses is unfit. He does not say Moses is unnecessary. He does not say, "Step aside, old man, we have a strategic plan."

He says, "This is too much for you. You cannot do it alone."

That is not condemnation.

That is grace.

Jethro gives Moses a pattern:

Pray. Teach. Show. Share.

Stand before God. Leadership does not begin with panic, strategy, or the loudest anxiety in the room. It begins before God.

Teach the people. Moses is not told to work harder. He is told to teach them the way.

Show them what faith looks like in motion: forgiveness practiced, truth spoken with grace, generosity held as a gift rather than a weapon, hope that refuses despair without denying reality.

And share the work. Choose faithful, trustworthy people. Give them real responsibility. Let them carry what they can carry, so Moses can carry what only Moses can carry.

This is not dumping tasks.

This is equipping with trust.

Moses does not stop leading.

He simply leads differently.

And that is where Exodus 18 speaks so directly to us today.

The church will not be renewed by a few people doing more.

The church will be strengthened when more of the baptized are taught, formed, trusted, and sent.

That is deeply Lutheran.

Luther did not teach the priesthood of all believers because he thought order did not matter or because the church lacked enough pastors during the Reformation. Luther cared deeply about preaching, teaching, sacraments, and good order. But Luther insisted that baptism gives every Christian a holy calling.

Not every Christian is called to the same office. Not every Christian is called to preach publicly or preside at the table. But every Christian is called. Every Christian bears Christ. Every Christian has gifts. Every Christian belongs to the ministry of the baptized.

We do not equip people because we need help keeping the machine running.

We equip people because they are baptized.

We do not equip people because the pastor is tired, though many are.

We do not equip people because the council is overwhelmed, though many are.

We do not equip people because the synod needs more pastors and deacons, though we probably do.

We equip people because Christ has claimed them in the waters of baptism, and the Spirit has already given gifts to the church.

From the beginning, God did not create human beings for isolation. God creates us for relationship, with God, with creation, with one another.

Even in Genesis, the first thing that is "not good" is not weakness. It is aloneness.

"It is not good that the human should be alone."

So, when Jethro says to Moses, "What you are doing is not good," maybe Scripture lets us hear that old creation truth again.

It is not good for the holy work to be carried alone.

Now, Moses is not Jesus.

Moses cannot carry the burdens of the people alone.

Jesus can.

Moses cannot bear sin, death, judgment, and the ache of the world on his shoulders.

Jesus can.

Moses cannot say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Jesus can.

And because Christ has carried what only Christ can carry, we are free to stop pretending that any one of us has to be Christ for the church.

Pastors do not have to be Jesus.

Bishops do not have to be Jesus.

Council presidents do not have to be Jesus.

The most faithful volunteer in the congregation need not be Jesus.

Jesus alone is Jesus.

And that is enough.

Jesus gives his body many members.

So maybe this assembly is not a waiting room.

Not a place where we stand in line, waiting for someone else to fix it, decide it, bless it, fund it, approve it, or carry it.

Maybe this assembly is an equipment room.

A place where the baptized remember who they are.

A place where weary leaders hear good news.

A place where the church tells the truth about exhaustion and then refuses to organize itself around it.

A place where we pray, teach, model, share, and send.

Because God refuses exhaustion, not us.

Against every system, every habit, every fear, every old pattern that keeps the people of God waiting for ministry instead of being equipped for ministry.

The burden is real.

The calling is holy.

The work is too big for one Moses.

But it is not too big for the body of Christ.

And by grace, that is who we are.

Amen!