

Redemption and Good Order **by the Rev. Gradye Parsons**

Exodus 18:13-27

The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men (sic) among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundred, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace." So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundred, fifties, and tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country.

Terence Fretheim, in his *Interpretation* commentary on Exodus, titled this section of chapter eighteen as "Redemption and Good Order." This is an appropriate title for an important section of Exodus that is easy to overlook. The story appears to be a rather ordinary story of frustration conquered by organization and administration. It foreshadows the creation of deacons by the disciples in the sixth chapter of Acts. We Presbyterians should find some comfort here in our own practice of facing problems by organizing and delegating.

Jethro sees Moses spending his time mediating disputes all day. There is no time for Moses to talk to God. There is no time for Moses to talk with Zipporah, Jethro's daughter. There is no time for Moses to talk with Gershom, Jethro's grandson. So Jethro does what any good father-in-law would do. He intervenes. "What you are doing is not good" (vs.17), says Jethro to Moses, a line heard by son-in-laws through the ages.

The planned solution is simple. Divide the cases among able persons who are to be trustworthy, fear God, and hate dishonest gain—good attributes in judges. Moses is to keep the big cases for himself. Moses implements the plan and bids a grateful goodbye to Jethro.

The question I have wrestled with when I have preached on this text is, judge what? What could these people have that would require all of this judging all day long? I realize that these are a grumpy people who are not afraid to name their complaints. After just three days of freedom they begin complaining about the waters at Marah (15:22). In the second month of freedom, they begin to complain that their Tupperware containers of food had run out. The persistent whine begins: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (16:3). The complaints continue in chapter 17, this time about water. These are not shy people. They don’t mind asking more from God, who drowned the Egyptian army in the sea and feeds them with quail and manna every day.

Still, what exactly were they asking Moses to judge? Let me try some possible questions for you:

Where should I pitch my tent? Where should my neighbors pitch their tents?
How do we manage the livestock and who has ownership?
Who approves of marriages?
Why did some get more of my Egyptian master’s and mistress’ gold and silver than I did?
To whose tribe do I belong?
Is everyone here Jewish enough to claim the promise?
Who is chief in our tribe? Does the slave structure of house servants over field servants apply here?
Who decides?

All of these questions are about the nature of the community that God is creating in the desert. They were a community in Egypt. They had directions for their work, their home, and their life. There was a defined social order and an understood status. Now they are in transition from a people who were property to a people who would own property. They are grumbling with God and each other as they move from an old social order to a new social order. They are looking to their judges to help them determine the new boundaries of a free people. They have experienced redemption and now they are seeking good order.

In Geneva there existed the consistory. It grew out of the understanding of the mark of a true church: good discipline. The consistory consisted of twelve elders and between nine and twenty-two pastors of Geneva. Its purpose was to establish discipline and promote a Christian manner of living. The minutes of the consistory have been published, and they

are fascinating to read.¹ Much of their work was in restoring relationships. Those relationships were between people and the church or between individuals.

There are stories of broken marriage promises. It was the custom for couples to initiate their sexual intimacy with each other after a promise of marriage had been made. The consistory would be called upon to judge what promises had actually been made and what promises had been broken. There were family quarrels. The consistory would seek to carefully restore the family relationships. Of course there were cases about church attendance. Even there the consistory would gently chide the individual and listen to complaints about long sermons.

Individuals were asked repeatedly to say the creed and the Lord's Prayer in their native language. It was a discipline used to help this new type of church community to fully realize the commitment to worship in their native language. The commitment to be people of the Word required a personal commitment to relearn the prayers they had been taught in Latin. Sometimes the children would pick it up faster than the adults. The consistory would ask the parents to let the children teach them. This was all part of the transition to being a new type of community built around a new type of church.

When we turn to the *Book of Confessions*, we see the development of the mark of discipline—but with cautions in its application.

From chapter 18 of The Scots Confession, we see:

The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, **ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished** (emphasis added).

In The Heidelberg Catechism, question 85, the discipline is balanced with a hope for redemption:

Q. 85. How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?
A. In this way: Christ commanded that those who bear the Christian name in an unchristian way either in doctrine or in life should be given brotherly admonition. If they do not give up their errors or evil ways, notification is given to the church or to those ordained for this by the church. Then, if they do not change after this warning, they are forbidden to partake of the holy Sacraments and are thus excluded from the communion of the church and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. **However, if they promise and show real amendment, they are received again as members of Christ and of the church** (emphasis added).

In The Second Helvetic Confession (5.165), we find more cautions about discipline:

DISCIPLINE. And since discipline is an absolute necessity in the Church and excommunication was once used in the time of the early fathers, and there were ecclesiastical judgments among the people of God, wherein this discipline was exercised by wise and godly men, it also falls to ministers to regulate this discipline for edification, according to the circumstances of the time, public state, and necessity. **At all times and in all places the rule is to be observed that everything is to be done for edification, decently and honorably, without oppression and strife. For the apostle testifies that authority in the Church was given to him by the Lord for building up and not for destroying (II Cor. 10:8). And the Lord himself forbade the weeds to be plucked up in the Lord's field, because there would be danger lest the wheat also be plucked up with it (Matt. 13:29 f.)** (emphasis added).

The sections on church censures in The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.172) includes language about the necessity of church discipline, but again with some cautions:

4. For the better attaining of these ends (church discipline), the officers of the church are **to proceed by admonition** (emphasis added), suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the Church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

In The Confession of 1967, the work of reconciliation through the Communion of the Holy Spirit (9.20) says:

God the Holy Spirit fulfills the work of reconciliation in man. The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church as the community in which men are reconciled to God and to one another. **He enables them to receive forgiveness as they forgive one another and to enjoy the peace of God as they make peace among themselves** (emphasis added). In spite of their sin, he gives them power to become representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all men.

The overall sense is that the goals of church discipline are redemption and good order. Redemption is the first goal with the hope for restoration and reconciliation with the individual and the church.

The *Rules of Discipline* continues this approach in its preamble. D-1.0103 calls the church to work first to conciliate and mediate before using the church judicial process. It is as though the judicial process is the fire ax in the glass box: only use in case all else fails. The structure is in place for censure or even removal from office. The highest achievement of the judicial process is not the decisions rendering punishment but the redemption of individuals and the building up of the body of Christ (D-1.0102).

So let me tell you two stories.

In 1758, a reference (similar to an overture) was brought to the synod from the Presbytery of New Brunswick. A Reverend Samuel Harker was accused of “having imbibed and vented certain erroneous doctrines.” It is important to note that imbibing meant absorbing into the mind. In Rev. Harker’s absence, the synod appointed a committee “to deal with him as they shall have opportunity, in such a manner as shall appear to them best adapted for his conviction (changing his mind); and refer further determination to next synod; if there shall be need;” and in the meantime, the synod recommended to the Presbytery of New Brunswick to take such measures as they shall judge best to prevent the spread and hurtful influences of these errors.

In 1760, the story continues with a report from the committee to the synod. The committee had read a paper from Rev. Harker explaining his views. Since Rev. Harker did not do a very good job with the paper, they proceeded to question him. The committee found that on many points Rev. Harker was not in error. The synod heard the report and, finding some success, asked the committee and some others to meet with Rev. Harker again and to further converse with him to convince him of his errors.

In 1761, Rev. Harker declared that he had prepared his sentiments for printing and that if the synod would take the time to read them and convince him that he was wrong, he would amend them. The synod agreed to allow the book to be printed and that they would read it.

In 1763, the synod continued its work with Rev. Harker. They called him and questioned him about his views. They rested for the night. The next day they resumed their work. They decided upon mature deliberation (I love that term) to come to the following judgment: “The Synod considering that Mr. Harker has for several years been dealt with in the tenderest of manner, and much pains have been taken by his brethren in private, and in the Presbytery to which he belongs, and by committees which to Synod appointed to confer with him, in order to reclaim him from his erroneous notions...disqualified for preaching.”

The synod spent five years working Rev. Harker. They gave him every opportunity to be heard and understood. They made every effort to convince him of his errors. The point is that there is no indication that they regretted the time. Their goal was to restore Rev. Harker and reconcile him to the church community. For that goal they were willing to spend the time and the effort.

On to the second story. My ancestor Joseph Parsons married Mary Bliss in 1646. They moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1654. Their family would eventually include eleven children, and Joseph would prosper in business. Local tradition has it that Mary was “possessed of great beauty and talents, but... not very amiable... exclusive in the choice of her associates, and ... of haughty manners.” In 1656, Joseph brought an action for slander against Sarah Bridgeman, who was publicly accusing Mary of being a witch. The Bridgeman misfortunes were as numerous as the Parsons fortunes. They had lost several of their livestock. With no real understanding of disease they turned to “Mary’s uncanny influence.” Their son had hurt his leg and had sworn that Mary Parsons’ spirit

was afflicting it. Joseph won the case and Sarah was required to pay a fine and to make public acknowledgement of the wrong she had done in Northampton and Springfield.

But it did not end there. In 1674, Mary was charged again. The charge came from Samuel Bartlett who had married a daughter of the Bridgeman's. Samuel's wife had died and, once again, Mary was blamed. This case did not go away so easily. The local magistrates decided that final jurisdiction belonged in Boston. Mary was taken to Boston where she was committed to prison until the trial. Ten weeks later the trial was conducted and Mary was once again ruled not guilty. Though she had a full acquittal, her undeserved reputation stayed with her. She and Joseph eventually left Northampton and lived a long life with a cloud of suspicion over her.

The perception is that our current climate around discipline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is more like Mary Parsons' story than Samuel Harker's. The reality is that the judicial process in the PC(USA) is basically working as it was designed to do. There are 190 individual judicial commissions in the denomination. They consist of volunteers and are staffed by stated clerks as one of the parts of their job description.

I believe that the source of our unease is not in the judicial process, but in another part of the picture. The highest goal of our system of discipline and oversight is restoration and reconciliation to the church community. The Reformers were cautious about ex-communication because it ended the ability of the church community to work with people for restoration.

What I would propose to you is that it is the state of the community that is creating anxiety in the system. If reconciliation to the community is the highest goal of discipline, then does it not follow that if the community is in a state of uncertainty, the reconciliation function will seem askew?

Is there any question that the PC(USA) and all mainline denominations are like the people of Israel in the desert? We are in the midst of leaving one way of being founded and shaped in the last millennium and moving toward some yet undetermined form. Christendom is being re-centered from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern, from a Euro-centric model to a multicultural model, from a very linear approach to a more global, holistic approach. For example, there will be over 600 million Christians in Africa by the year 2025.

We all remember the fleshpots of the high day of the Presbyterian Church. That is not where we are now, and if we are brave enough we could confess our own slavery to the culture of that period. We are on a journey toward a new way of being. During that journey we will have as many questions and grumbles as did the people in the desert. We too will turn to our judges to help us understand the new boundaries. There are some who would say we need a monarch to decide instead of judges, but we all know how that turned out.

Some have framed this time as a “judicial season.” I would say we are in a judging season, or maybe even a discerning season. Who we will be at the end of our denominational journey in the wilderness is based on God’s promise to us as seen in God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ. As a church community we are going to bump up against each other on this journey. But if we hold on to what is the core value of our discipline system—restoration and reconciliation—we too will experience redemption and good order.

¹Robert Kingman, general editor. *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2000.