

Balancing Act: The Perfect Job
Exodus 18:14-27
June 5, 2011

How many of you have ever been to a circus? What was your favorite part?

I remember as a young child being amazed at the high wire performers—those men and women who stepped out onto what looked like a thread to my eyes so far below them. Inch by inch the tightrope artist gracefully moved across that wire with horizontal pole in hand—sometimes dancing, leaping, even turning around. The tension was high—especially if we knew he or she was not tethered to a safety rope, because there was always a constant perceptible motion of teetering slightly this way or that. They were always in the process of balancing.

Robert Schnase, in his book The Balancing Act, reflects that we all live our lives much like high wire performers. He writes “It has taken me a while to abandon the notion [that life can ever be fully balanced] and to embrace the idea of balancing life.

“This difference may seem subtle, but it is really quite significant. We are never the perfect weight; we never find the perfect mix of work and play; and we never manage to feed all our physical, emotional, and spiritual hungers with the exact portions necessary while also sustaining those around us and meeting all our professional and community obligations. We never find the ideal pattern that needs no reconsideration, recalibration, or rebalancing. Life is constant movement, forward stepping, sidetracking, detouring, self-correcting, getting a little lost, and finding our way back with the help of friends.... Balancing life’s tasks, challenges and callings is spiritual work, a matter of will, effort, prayer, decision, priority, change, growth, risk, grace, more grace, and reliance upon God” and upon the ones who love us. (Robert Schnase, The Balancing Act, Abingdon, 2009, pp. 14-15)

Over the next few weeks we’ll be exploring what the Word of God reveals to us about life’s balancing act—how God leads us along the tightwires of our living, the pole of our faith giving us balance in all areas of life.

We start the series today by looking at one of the major causes of imbalance in our lives—the relationship between our productivity, whether that be our jobs or volunteer activities—and the rest of our lives—whatever we define as our work.

Ten years ago, a Gallup Poll did a study of "**Attitudes In The American Workplace VI**" and found that:

- 80% of workers feel stress on the job; nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress; and 42% say their coworkers need such help;
- 14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn't;
- 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress, 10% are concerned about an individual at work they fear could become violent;
- 9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace and 18% had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year. (Gallup Poll sponsored by the Marlin Company, 2000)

Stress is now known to be one of the leading causes of heart disease and cancer. It is one of the leading causes of depression. Many times it can lead to migraine headaches, hypertension, chest pains, ulcers, gastritis, colitis, and heartburn—which I'm feeling right now just naming all the problems!

This is not unique to our generation. The tendency for workaholism—the pop-psychology term for work-out-of balance—is as old as human-kind itself, and the Bible gives us a wonderful example from one of the great men of our faith of what to do—and what not to do—in the story of Moses.

Moses, as you may remember, grew up in a palace of privilege—barely having to lift his little finger for anything before a servant in the realm of Ramses of Egypt took care of his needs.

Then, as a young adult, Moses discovered the truth of his heritage—that he was not Egyptian but a descendant of Abraham—one of the enslaved peoples. He began a journey of self-discovery that took him away from Cairo and to the small farming community of Midian. There he met and married his wife Zipporah and

learned to work from his father-in-law Jethro, who assigned him the duty of shepherd.

While tending his flock one day, Moses happened upon a burning bush, and from that bush the voice of God called him to do new work—hard work; to shepherd his people out of bondage in Egypt and into the freedom of the promised land.

Moses did everything he could to get out of that work. He felt inadequate. He tried one excuse after another—“Hey God, I stutter! I can’t possibly speak on your behalf.” Still, God had a solution for every excuse, and so Moses finally accepted the role as the leader of the people of Israel.

One of the greatest stories of our faith is how Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt. The dramatic escape has captured our imagination for ages, the subject of books and films.

But what most of us have probably never considered is what happened to Moses AFTER the Red Sea--how his biggest job stress was how to handle the wandering whiners in the desert for 40 years.

I suppose Moses might have thought that since he was skilled in herding sheep that he’d be an expert in herding people. But just like sheep, we know how people sometimes wander away from the expected norms of behavior. And unlike sheep, human beings murmur and complain, and get into disputes with one another when crowded into a confined community.

Once Moses embraced his call, he seriously took it to heart. He claimed his ordination as leader of the people, and he was focused on doing what he thought was God’s will.

That meant he felt he had to take care of everything himself. **He** was the one God spoke to in the burning bush. **He** was the one who carried the staff of the Lord, and who heard God’s voice from the cloud of knowing that led them.

And so whenever any problem of any sort came up, he felt like he was the one who had to handle it, to solve it.

Our scripture today tells us about how God spoke to Moses—this time through the wisdom of his father-in-law Jethro, who had come for a family visit soon after they had escaped Egypt.

Throughout his visit with his daughter and son-in-law, Jethro watched as Moses worked himself to the bone from dawn to dusk. He saw the haggard look on Moses' face, and heard the strain in the conversations between husband and wife who rarely had a moment to themselves and their children.

Finally, Jethro decided to have a heart to heart with Moses. Did you hear what he said to one of our greatest heroes of the faith? He said, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourself out. The work is too heavy for you, and you cannot handle it alone."

Jethro saw that Moses' work life was out of balance. He saw that the parts of his life with his family and personal spiritual time were not getting any focus, and everything was suffering because of the imbalance.

Jethro—the wise elder and patriarch of his family—had probably been-there/done-that in his own life. Most of us, as we begin our career and our families, have to learn that balancing act. The primary way we learn is by trial and error—and by the sharing of wisdom by those we trust who help us see where we are blinded.

What Jethro helped Moses see first and foremost was that he needed to set his boundaries. He needed to familiarize himself with his limits—being aware of what he could handle reasonably before feeling like he was sinking, drowning in his work.

In the 19th century the shipping industry was having a very difficult time because ships were sinking in heavy seas. In 1880 Samuel Plimsoll of the United Kingdom realized that the ships were sinking because they were too heavily laden. He submitted a bill in Parliament insisting that a line be drawn around the outside of the hull on all British ships. When the ships were loaded with freight and reached the leve where the line hit the water, the ships were not allowed to load anymore

freight, because they knew any load heavier than that would sink the ship. The marking on a ship's line became known as the Plimsoll line.

Jethro helped Moses to see he needed a Plimsoll line on his own life. He needed to set limits—time limits, degrees of trouble-shooting limits.

I would guess Moses is not the only one who needs to learn the lesson of setting limits. How aware are you of your limits? Do you find yourself to be like Moses, eating on the run, ripping from one end of the camp to the other, planning appointments on top of each other, meeting deadlines, dropping what you're doing whenever someone asks you to? Perhaps there are some of us here today who need to learn to draw a Plimsoll line around our calendars, our time, balancing our work with other parts of our lives.

Still, if you're like me, we still have this awareness that the problems don't go away just because we've drawn a line. There are still things that have to be done, people's needs that have to be met, deadlines in our work that must be managed even if we try to draw lines.

So Jethro's elder-wisdom teaches us another balancing act in the scripture today. He directed Moses: "Your job is to teach them the rules and instructions, to show them how to live, what to do {so they can take responsibility for their own lives and work. And you need to keep a sharp eye out for competent folk—people who respect God, folks who are honest and have integrity. These you will appoint as leaders over groups organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. They'll be responsible for the everyday work of judging among the people. They'll bring the hard cases to you, but in the routine cases they'll be the judges. They will share your load and that will make it easier for you. If you handle the work this way, you'll have the strength to carry out whatever God commands you, and the people in their settings will flourish also."

What's the balancing word of this advice? Delegate! Delegate to others what others can do, so you can focus on the things that only you can do. Nobody is indispensable, but everybody is important.

Do you notice that Jethro doesn't just tell Moses to dump the work on just anybody? He stresses the importance of to whom he delegates those jobs. Delegation is more than just giving a job away. Delegation to the wrong person is a recipe for disaster.

When you delegate, you've got to 1) find the right people; 2) give them the right job, 3) let go and trust them to do the right thing.

No matter how indispensable we think we are to a company or an organization—no matter how much we think we have to prove ourselves to others—we won't do anybody any good if we're burned out. Jethro's advice to Moses continues to remind us to: Do only what we can do by knowing and keep our limits. Delegate the rest to others and finally—our third balancing word of the day is to leave the results to God.

Frankly—that's where Jethro started with his advice to Moses. He said, "Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God."

This was the root of Moses' problem. He had been spending too much time talking to the people about God and not enough time talking to God about the people.

When we feel we are between a rock and a hard place and are being pressed in on every side, squeezed in from every direction—that is stress doing a number on us. In the middle of that stress, God calls out to us and says the words we know from the Gospel of Matthew ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

God helps us handle our work stresses. After all, it was God who gave us our varied callings, our gifts and skills that have led us to career choices we've made. And it will be God who helps us balance our work with the other parts of our lives if we take time each day to pray, to sit in silent contemplation and conversation with our maker.

Now I don't usually quote from The Donald too much, but every now and then he has a few nuggets that are worth their weight in his casino chips.

Donald Trump once said of work: "If you're interested in 'balancing' work and pleasure, stop trying to balance them. Instead make your work more pleasurable." Moses' work became more pleasurable once he set his limits, got the help he needed through delegation, and spent more time with his family and his God.

Of course, this is not the perfect solution! The story continues later, sharing how one of the leaders whom Moses delegated some of the work to, his brother Aaron, later led the people astray while Moses was up on the mountain getting the ten commandments. Aaron misled the people to thinking that all their problems could be solved if they simply took all their gold, melted it down, and molded into the image of a calf that they could worship.

So Moses had to deal with that when he came off the mountain. Remember—there is NO PERFECT JOB even for the prophet of God. Like Robert Schnase said at the beginning of his book—we never live a *balanced* life; we're always living a *balancing* life—constantly having to shift one way or another on the tightrope of life.

Still, it helps to know that our faith in God is the balancing pole of our public work—and indeed in all of life. Next week we'll explore how it is that God helps balance our interior lives—finding that peace that passes all understanding. Until then, may you become aware of God's balancing presence in your life.

(Much of this was guided and directed by a sermon written by Dr. James Merritt in a sermon entitled "What Do I Do when the Load is Too Heavy?")