

March 27, 2011: DANGEROUS TERRITORY
Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42; Psalm 95
Eileen Parfrey -- Springwater Presbyterian Church

Perhaps, like many others, you have wondered what pastors talk about when they get together and no one else is around. To set your minds at rest—that we *do not* talk about you—today we eavesdrop on two pastors who meet regularly for lunch, doing the theological equivalent of exchanging recipes. Let's call them Sid and Lavae. Their denominations don't matter; what is important is that they've been doing this long enough, they not only have warm regard for one another, but they hold each other accountable. Lavae is an intentional interim pastor, now serving as head-of-staff for a fading downtown church. Sid pastors a suburban congregation just coming out of a five-year period of annually doubling its size. After greetings and the debate about what to order, Sid confesses, "This is my fifth time through the lectionary cycle, and I'm sick to death of the same old approach to this week's story of water from the rock."

Lavae makes a quirky smile and asks, "You mean the one where you talk about Israel failing to catch the point of escaping the plagues of Egypt and the Angel of Death and the clutches of the most technological and best-equipped army of the time? Where they complain about hunger and food just shows up on the ground every morning? And then they *still* wonder whether they can trust God? You mean that approach?"

"Yeah," Sid sighs. "The one where I then rag on the congregation about learning to trust God. I'm thinking of preaching on Moses' leadership style."

"Oh man," Lavae moans. "That's dangerous territory. You're on a slippery slope to seeing yourself as the martyr who could lead this group of sinners to Kingdom Come and Mega-Church Nirvana, if only they would do what you tell them to do. Don't do it, Sid," she pleads. "You'll only get resentful and make them feel guilty and inadequate. And even worse—some of them *will* think you're the Messiah."

"You must have forgotten," Sid sniffs. "I lead the fastest growing congregation in my district. I might *be* that expert." But he quickly shifts back to an easy manner. "You know as well as I that every pastor wonders about leadership effectiveness when giving is down and attendance falls—even if the economy is bad and it's soccer season. What I thought I'd do is ask, 'If you wrote a book on church leadership, what would you call it and why?'" When Lavae stops laughing, Sid asks what her book would be. "I'd call my book, *Just Because You Can Doesn't Mean You Should*," she says. "That's the interim pastor's cautionary tale. What about yours?"

Sid's answer is immediate. "Mine would be *Just Because You're Successful Doesn't Mean You're Right*. I figure, a church as successful as ours needs a healthy respect for the sovereignty of God, especially since all the popular religious press sings about lately is bigger churches being better and smarter and more holy."

Lavae makes an unladylike snorting noise. "You might be onto something there, Sid, but I'm not hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ in this."

“I expected you to say that,” Sid answers. “As far as I’m concerned, the whole point to church leadership, at the heart of what we do, is asking the question Israel asks, ‘Is God with us or not?’ I think most American Christians harbor a secret fear that God has abandoned the church and the culture and them personally.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Lavae responds. “I think you’re missing the boat when you don’t also include the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman. It will give you the commentary you need for Moses and water from the rock.”

“What, because of the water?” Sid almost sneers.

“You are so literal,” Lavae laughs. “I mean the theology, the tension. Do you realize, the Samaritan woman is the only person to whom Jesus admits that he really is the Messiah?”

Sid looks puzzled. “How is that revelation about theological tension?”

Lavae looks smug. “Abundance.”

“You mean ‘lots of water?’” Sid asks, “Lots of water from the rock and lots from the well? *That* seems literal. And then how do you connect to the 21st century, where all we have to do is turn on the faucet? You don’t see our youth group carrying 5 gallon buckets of water for three miles, just to get its family’s daily water ration. Every time we use the toilet, we flush what most of the Third World uses all day for a family of four!”

“I’m talking about the theological tension,” Lavae interjects. “It’s where the real nuts and bolts of God’s saving grace can be found, where human vulnerability and God’s abundance meet. Leadership, for me, isn’t the issue. Sure, Moses’ leadership is called into question because in their thirst, the people themselves are vulnerable, and wonder whether they can trust God’s abundance. Moses faces his own personal vulnerability, when God requires him, as a leader, to stand out in front of everyone and hit the rock, the most fruitless gesture in the world—acting like water will come from a solid rock in a place where it barely rains. What if he fails? Can *he* trust God? And that the poor, embarrassed, rejected, shunned, abused Samaritan woman! Coming to the well alone in the heat of the day, because none of the women would be caught dead near her. She has nothing, but risks all of her nothing to get the whole town to experience what she experienced, because of this guy who *knows who she is and loves her anyhow*. That kind of vulnerable.”

“Lavae, honey.” Is Sid beginning to see her point? “Lavae, vulnerability is a fact of life. Our loved ones get sick, they languish, they die. Our children make terrible choices and we’re unable to rescue them. We’re forced into life transitions we never wanted to make, we lose our jobs and our abilities. To be human is to be vulnerable.”

“Exactly,” Lavae says. “And yet! And yet, the tension is there. In the midst of the reality of our vulnerability, *God is abundant*. Food shows up every day, and on the days it doesn’t, as if to drive home God’s point, the leftovers are fine. The most unlikely, improbably place to look for water when you’re dying of thirst is *exactly* where it is—that *unlikely* place. Who is to say,” she asks, “who’s to say, if we didn’t thirst, maybe the water wouldn’t show? If we weren’t hungry,

maybe we wouldn't notice all the food around us. If the woman at the well weren't so lonely, so desperate for a word of hope, maybe she would have just handed a drink to the stranger without even talking to him."

Sid is silent, then says, "I see what you're saying, Lavae. If we didn't realize our need, we wouldn't see the abundance that is God. The good and loyal friends. Books that miraculously give their insights when we need them most. The personal shift from entitlement to gratitude when we realize how tenuous everything is."

Lavae nods and adds, "The willingness not to over-accomplish or do everything alone. It doesn't depend on us! Giving up that self-pride that pushes everyone else away, while we say, 'Me do it!' like some toddler."

Sid thinks for a moment, then asks, "Would you change the title of your book?" She looks quizzical, so he adds, "Your leadership book. Knowing what we're saying about the tension between God's abundance and our vulnerability, would you call it something other than, *Just Because You Can Doesn't Mean You Should?*"

Recognition dawns for Lavae. "I think I would. I think I'd call it, *It Isn't Abundance Until It's Yours*. Because of what Jesus tells the woman at the well, where he says, 'The water that I give *will become* in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.' The water isn't abundant, isn't living, doesn't bubble up into eternal life until we *receive* it." Then she asks, "How about you—what would yours be?"

Sid considers a moment and says, "I think I'd call mine, *Thank God It's Not Up to Me*. It's still about the sovereignty of God, like *Just Because You're Successful Doesn't Mean You're Right*. But I think there's a deeper level of trust in the new title, because it welcomes and receives my own vulnerability. And that's where God gets a chance to work."

[Sermons Page](#)