

Sunday, September 30, 2012: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

If Moses is any example, the pastor's yoke was never light. He wasn't very far into his 40-year pastorate when he learned that his flock did not feel called to provide him with constant affirmation.

by [Brant S. Copeland](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue

My dad was a pastor. After serving in World War II, he went to college on the G.I. Bill and then on to seminary. Like other mainline denominations, the Presbyterian Church was in full growth mode back then, and clergy ranked high in polls among the nation's most trusted and respected professionals. When I walked down the street by my father's side, I observed proudly that men—even older men—would doff their hats and greet him with deference. Back then a clerical collar elicited not only cultural respect but also a discount at the local department store and a complimentary membership in the country club.

One of my sons is a pastor now. When I tell him what ministry was like in his grandfather's day, he smiles politely and makes a mental note to say something about it in his blog: it's a good illustration of the way the world used to be. These days a clerical collar is much more likely to elicit bafflement or outright hostility. Once, while wearing a dog collar in Walmart, I was mistaken for an employee. On another occasion I was asked what I was doing in a public restroom with a small boy.

I'm not complaining (not much, anyway). I didn't go into this work for the perks. And I've found that as the perks fade away, it's easier to discern the true nature of servanthood.

If Moses is any example, the pastor's yoke was never light. He wasn't very far into his 40-year pastorate when he learned that his flock did not feel called to provide him with constant affirmation. That turned out to be an understatement: they

wanted meat and they wanted it now. The manna that Moses had procured through pleading with YHWH had quickly become boring fare. What, they were wondering, had Moses done for them lately?

The image Moses invoked in his complaint to YHWH was, curiously, both paternal and maternal: “Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling child’?” Like any mother or father who has carried an exhausted child for miles, Moses was ready to collapse: “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”

YHWH took pity on Moses and told him how to get organized: choose 70 elders to share the load, and the Lord himself would conduct the leadership training workshop. YHWH descended in a cloud upon the tent of meeting, spoke to Moses and gave each of the 70 a portion of the spirit that was already on Moses. Case closed. Problem solved.

Except that it wasn’t. Eldad and Medad, who seem to have been on the reserve list, received some of the Lord’s spirit too. This played havoc with Joshua’s flow charts, and he complained to Moses that this would not do. “My lord Moses, stop them!”

But Moses was learning that humility involves sharing the burden of ministry. Being stingy with the Holy Spirit only made his job harder—and besides, the Spirit blows where it will. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Something similar happens in Mark 9. Jesus’ disciples are arguing about which of them is worthy of the most perks. Jesus places a little child by his side and tells his disciples that “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all . . . whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:35, 37).

Just ask Moses. Nothing teaches humility like toting a child “in your bosom” on a 40-year hike through the wilderness. Anyone who welcomes a burden like that welcomes Jesus.

My experience with a man named John cemented my understanding of burden as part of ministry. John was a strapping, energetic man, a retired professor of business and a dynamo for good in our community. He fought cancer for many months and kept the disease at bay until the medical options were exhausted and hospice was

called in. In the last few weeks I dropped by his house every day to see how the day had gone and to pray with him and his wife Kate.

When Kate called to say that John seemed near the end, my wife and I went over right away and were there when his breathing stopped. When the funeral director arrived, we realized that the hall was too narrow to accommodate his gurney, so we wrapped John's body in a sheet, and I took him in my arms. He was no heavier than one of the children I hold above the baptismal font before he or she dies to Christ and is raised to new life in him. I carried John down the hall and out the door.

It's what we pastors and Christian leaders—past, present and future—do.