

FROM ALL THE PEOPLE

Union Service at
University United Methodist, Duluth August 4, 1974 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Exodus 18: 21. "Moreover choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe..."

Back around 1960 I could claim a passing acquaintance with two newly elected congressmen representing districts in southern Wisconsin. One had served as pastor of the Congregational Church in Burlington and presided, in fact, at my own installation. He was known as an extremely conservative Republican who at one time had worked as a bricklayer. The other congressman was a young lawyer from the town where I lived. He did not belong to my church, but I ran into him from time to time. I can recall my secretary arriving late and bedraggled one day because she had stayed up all night in this man's home awaiting the returns of his first election to the House of Representatives. Unlike my ministerial colleague, this man was known as an extremely liberal Democrat. Indeed, about the only thing these two novice congressmen seemed to have in common was the fact that they both had names of a sort that win elections in southern Wisconsin. One was Henry C. Schadeberg; the other was Robert W. Kastenmeier.

I don't know what became of Henry Schadeberg. But last week Robert Kastenmeier surfaced for me again on national television. He was there along with thirty-seven other people playing a decisive role in one of the most momentous events in American history. I am not going to discuss the substance of the House Judiciary debate this morning. I am not going to talk about impeachment. But I would like to share with you an observation that came to me as I looked at Mr. Kastenmeier and his colleagues.

Consider for a moment some of the people whose faces and voices became familiar to so many millions of Americans these last few days:

First of all, we have a gentleman from New Jersey named Peter W. Rodino, Jr., the son of Italian immigrants.

When I was growing up in New Jersey, Italian Americans were the bottom of the heap next to black people.

But not only is a man named Rodino serving as chairman of this august body, but on "the other side" is another gentleman from New Jersey named Joseph J. Mazuziti.

Or consider the gentleman from Iowa, Edward Mezvinsky. At one point he informed us that his parents were immigrants from Poland and czarist Russia.

And then there is the gentlelady from Texas, Barbara Jordan. She is a lawyer. My father used to say that nearly all the women lawyers he knew had to settle in the end for being glorified legal secretaries. She is a black lawyer. She is a black woman lawyer serving in the House of Representatives. She is a black woman lawyer who talks like a walking copy of Blackstone and who is participating in one of the most important decisions in American political and constitutional history. How many people like her did we have walking around back in the days when they impeached Andrew Johnson?

There are two black gentlemen on the committee, and there is a white gentlelady young enough to be somebody's granddaughter.

There is a Jesuit priest, a gentleman from Massachusetts named Robert Drinan.

There is a Republican from Maine by the name of Cohen.

There is another gentlemen from New Jersey named Sandman who sounds like the Godfather's mouthpiece. And there is a gentleman named Hungate from Missouri with the accent and the wit of Mark Twain.

But just to top it all off and to provide some balance, perhaps, there is a gentleman from upstate New York, named Hamilton Fish. The old timers will remember that there was a congressman by that name who was a great thorn in the side of President Franklin Roosevelt. He was a Republican who term after term was elected and reelected from Roosevelt's home district. His ideas were so extreme, so people said, that he was pro-Nazi and linked to the German-American Bund. But he kept winning elections against the opposition of his own party leaders until finally, as I recall, they gerrymandered his district and he lost.

Now there is another Hamilton Fish in Congress. But he is not just the second by that name. The Columbia Encyclopedia informs me that way back at the time of the Revolution there was a New York Fish named Nicholas Fish, who was a great pal of Alexander Hamilton. He named his son Hamilton, who also served in the House. Later he became Secretary of State. All told there have been four gentlemen from New York by the name of Hamilton Fish who rose to high political places.

Which says to us, perhaps, that you don't have to be an Italian immigrant's son or a black lady lawyer to get elected to something. Even those old patrician families can still make it to Congress.

Now as I beheld this company of diverse American citizens sitting on the House Judiciary Committee, a message came through to me and I find it rather heartening. It is a message about the progress we have made in pursuit of the ideal of democracy.

Of course, it is very easy to grow cynical about this observation of mine. One can point to the calculated way in which the back room politicians take advantage of ethnic block voting and all that sort of thing. One may observe that the Judiciary Committee does not accurately reflect the makeup of the House as a whole. Or one may want to ask, "Why isn't there anyone under thirty on that committee? Why aren't there nineteen women instead of only two? Why do they limit this task to lawyers? Why no plumbers or comptometer operators?

Even so, I find something very remarkable in the makeup of that committee. I saw there people from every part of the country, city people and country people, black people and white people, old people and relatively young people, men and women, Catholics, Protestants and Jews, Anglo-Americans, German-Americans, Polish-Americans, liberals and conservatives - all there together entrusted with an enormous responsibility in behalf of the people and tackling that responsibility with vigor, intelligence and sincerity.

And I say that is something to celebrate and that is something to be proud of. A lot of people are depressed today about the whole climate of government and well they might be. A lot of people have the feeling, and I am one of them, that the events in Washington are but a symptom of a serious breakdown in economic and political structures on a world-wide scale. These are grievous times.

But note this: at no other time in the history of mankind and at no other place than here in America has an instrument of government so widely representative of so diverse a population ever sat in judgment upon a chief of state. The fact is that despite racial prejudice, despite the exploitation of immigrant groups, despite tensions between rival faiths, despite graft, corruption and general subversion of the political system on every level of government, despite all these obstacles and more, we in this country have made some progress in the direction of government by and of the people.

The issues of presidential impeachment aside, that message came through to me as I looked at those faces and listened to those voices on the House Judiciary Committee.

And I say, no matter how depressed we may feel about the state of the world, that's something worth celebrating. We are approaching now the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of our nation. What a tragedy it would be if at this juncture in our history we allowed cynicism and despair to prevent us from going forward to build upon those very real achievements we have made as a nation in behalf of democratic institutions. For one thing is sure: we shall never solve the morality problem in government so long as we suffer from a morale problem in the nation.

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Three thousand years before anyone dreamed of a United States of America, a new nation was passing through the trauma of birth in the Sinai peninsula. Moses had led his people out of Egypt. He was trying to get them to the promised land. He was priest, prophet, governor, general, legislator and judge. The burden was getting him down, especially the judge part. Every morning the lines formed outside his tent, lines of people wishing him to arbitrate their disputes.

Now it happened that en route to Mt. Sinai, Moses stopped by to visit his in-laws. His father-in-law, Jethro, looked out on that huge, inchoate mass of people invading his quiet wilderness, and he observed how things were piling up on Moses. It isn't often that a man welcomes advice from his father-in-law, but Jethro was a wise old guy. Some scholars believe that Moses even got his religion from Jethro and his desert clan known as the Kenites. In any case, Jethro told Moses that that was no way to run a government. You had to delegate responsibility. You had to achieve some division of labor. "Divide up the people into communities of fifty, and a hundred and so forth," he said, "and then appoint able men from every tribe to look after them, men who are trustworthy and will not accept bribes." Then this people "will go to their place in peace."

Moses followed his father-in-law's advice. Had he not done so, it is doubtful that the Bible would have made it past the book of Exodus.

Today, too, we are a people passing through the wilderness looking for the promised land. After thirty-odd centuries we have gained a little more administrative savvy than the people of Israel possessed when they started

out. It remains to be seen whether we possess as much courage and moral stamina. But what we need is essentially what Jethro observed that the Hebrews needed. It is representative leaders of moral integrity who will work to improve the system.

Now such leadership will not be forthcoming if we retreat into cynicism and indifference. Such leadership will not appear if we say to our sons and daughters, "Don't go into politics; that's a dirty business." So long as we accept it as our fate that society shall be a sordid mess, society shall be a sordid mess.

But the promise of a better land can open once we perceive that even though society is a sordid mess, it is not a total loss. We've come a little distance in 30 odd centuries - we don't need to depend on Moses alone. We've got the Mezvinskys and the Marazatis working for us now. And if we don't like them, we can choose others. If we can create a climate of hope and determination and commitment to democratic ideals held together by tough moral discipline we have a chance. "We will be able to endure, and all this people will go to their place in peace."