

Story: Follow the Leaders

September 29, 2024

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Mark 9:38-50

It's a funny thing about people. Sometimes people choose leaders without getting them ready for leadership first. You've probably seen it in school sometimes. The teacher asks someone to lead the class in a song or a reading, but it turns out they hadn't learned it yet.

That can be pretty embarrassing.

As it happens, it's not just humans who do such things, although it turns out that for a lot of those creatures, a school is also the place to do them. A school of ta'ape, or "Bluestripe Snapper," selected a relatively young fish to be the leader of their school one season. He was pretty big, he seemed pretty smart, and as far as anyone could tell without asking, he seemed to know what he was doing.

He... didn't know what he was doing.

The first hour was a disaster. He tried calling out from the front of the school, "Everybody turn right!" And everybody turned right. Everybody who heard him. That wasn't all that many of them. It was a big school, and his loudest voice didn't carry all the way to the back, or even to the middle. Fish swam off in all sorts of different directions. It was quite a muddle.

Fortunately, he *was* a smart ta'ape, and one thing about being smart is knowing when you need to learn something. Clearly there were things he needed to learn about leading the school, and he needed to learn them quickly. So when the school was feeding quietly on some beds of algae, he sought out some of the ta'ape kupuna and said, "I need some help. How do I get the school to follow?"

The kupuna were gracious. One or two of them did think he might have learned this before, but they kept quiet about it. They told him the secret.

"You need to choose fish to lead with you."

"The school is too big for one fish to lead," they said. "As you've found, it can't be done by one fish. So you appoint other leaders, and space them throughout the school. The ones closest to you listen for what you're doing, and the ones farther away listen for what they're doing. When you turn, they turn, and the other leaders turn, and the school turns."

The leader was relieved. He didn't have to do this alone. He would have help. He promptly asked as many of the kupuna as were willing (some of them thought it was time for some new fish to learn) to become the other leaders, and he found a few more fish and taught them what they needed to know.

The next time he directed the school toward clearer water they turned in a flash. He laughed for joy, and so did the other leaders, and so did the whole school full of fish, because he'd led them all in joy.

by Eric Anderson