

Passing the mantle

2 Kings 2:1-18

February 19, 2012

I swear by my loyalty to the living Lord and to you that I will not leave you.

That's what Elisha said, three times over, and he meant it. He didn't leave Elijah, but Elijah left him. Elijah -- his teacher, his mentor, his spiritual father, his closest friend -- left him.

It happens. The time comes. Those who have gone before us, those who have taught us, those who have shown us the way, those on whom we have relied for wisdom and for strength, for comfort and for counsel, leave us.

We read some of their names at annual meeting: Harold Brock and James Damon, Alice Carrigg and Betty Dalton, Fred Koch and Dick Brecunier, Noreen Fischer and Richard Mehlich. We could add so many more names to that list: Bob Sheridan and Lory Hornung, Erhart and Lorna Petersen, Robbins Fischer and Charles Pickett, Dick Morris and Meg Allbaugh, Bill and May Rickert, Chick and Catherine Jensen, Lowell Walker, John and Marge Young, Fern Murphy and Mitzi Makinster and Winnie Deeds, Jim Gordon and Ardythe Townsend and Muriel Moe.

During my seventeen and a half years here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, just short of two hundred of our members have left us. And we are like Elisha. We don't want to let them go!

Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master away from you today?

Yes, I know, but let's not talk about it!

We don't want to let them go -- all of us, not just their own family members, their own wives and husbands, sons and daughters. We don't want to let them go because they have been our teachers, our mentors, our models. They built this church family and held it together and made it what it is today. We are indebted to and awed by their loyalty and their courage and their dedication. They were here, giving of themselves for the sake of this church and its mission, Sunday after Sunday (and Monday after Monday!), year after year, decade after decade. What would we be without them? What will we do without them?

But the time comes and they are gone and we have to pick up the mantle, because the mantle is left behind!

My father, my father!, Elisha cried. Mighty defender of Israel! You are gone!

He tore his own cloak in grief and then he went over and picked up Elijah's cloak, Elijah's mantle that had been left behind after Elijah was taken away, Elijah's mantle which Elijah had used to strike the waters of the Jordan River and divide them. Elisha picked up the mantle and walked back to the banks of the Jordan and struck the water himself with the mantle.

This story is the origin of the expression, "passing the mantle." The mantle of Elijah is passed on to Elisha. The symbol of the prophet, the emblem of his prophetic power, is passed on to his successor. It means much the same as "passing the torch" or "passing the gavel" but is a more powerful image because a mantle is worn, not just used. It is a symbol not just of what you do but of who you are.

Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle, walked back to the banks of the Jordan River and struck the water ... and nothing happened! Nothing happened!

Why didn't anything happen? Nothing happened because the power was not in the mantle. The power comes from the Lord!

Elisha shouted, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" and struck the water a second time. The waters divided and Elisha walked through the river to the other side and the fifty prophets watching him exclaimed, "The power of Elijah is on Elisha!"

But they were mistaken. The power was not in the mantle and the power was not in Elijah. The power comes from the Lord and is made effective in those to whom the Lord chooses to give it. It's true that Elisha asked for that power. He said to Elijah, "Let me receive the share of your power that will make me your successor."

But the Lord is the source of the power, not Elijah, so I believe the key word in Elisha's request is not "power," but "successor." Elisha is asking that he be able to pick up where Elijah has left off, to be able to continue to do what Elijah has been doing. The mantle that is passed from Elijah to Elisha is not a symbol of power, but a symbol of task, of role, of calling. When Elisha puts on Elijah's mantle, he assumes Elijah's role. He now will fulfill Elijah's calling.

And what is that role? What is that calling? Elisha names it: "My father, my father! Mighty defender of Israel!" Elijah was the mighty defender of Israel.

Now you have to understand that there were a great many people in Israel, including several of its kings, who would dispute that! King Ahab called Elijah “the worst troublemaker in Israel,” not the defender of the state and its interests, but its antagonist. Elijah criticized the king’s policies and condemned his decisions and told him it would not rain in Israel until he, Elijah, said so. And it didn’t. The people suffered under years of drought and the resulting famine. Ahab and his queen Jezebel and his successor Ahaziah all tried to have Elijah arrested or killed.

But Elijah said it was Ahab, Ahab and his father, Omri, who were the troublemakers because they led the people away from the source of their life. They turned the people away from the way of the living Lord to the ways of impotent idols. They were the troublemakers. They were the ones who were destroying Israel, poisoning its roots, undermining its foundations, cutting it off from its source of life.

So Elijah was the defender of Israel, not the defender of Israel as it was or as it had become, but the defender of Israel as it was meant to be, the Israel that God had called into being, the Israel that God has made his own, the Israel that God intended to serve as a light to the nations. Elijah did defend Israel from its enemies, but, more importantly, Elijah defended Israel against becoming its own worst enemy. Elijah called Israel back to its best self. Elijah called Israel back to its true self.

We are the people of God, people that God has made his own. We are, each of us, creatures made in God’s own image, and we are, together, a people brought into community by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Like Israel, our community has a mission, a purpose, and, like Israel, we can lose our way.

We can lose our way. We can fail to fulfill our calling. We can get off course. We can hurt ourselves. We can cut ourselves off from the source of life. We can sully the beauty God has put into each of us and into all of us together.

It is the task of God’s servants to defend us, to call us back, to restore us to our true selves and our true purpose, to save us, to keep us on task, to keep us on course, to keep us close (we are never too close!) to the Lord, to the source of life.

That is the role, the calling, the mantle of God’s servants, and that mantle has been passed on to us. Those who have gone ahead of us are gone. Francis Bernardone and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King are gone. C. S. Lewis and Henri Nouwen and Mother Teresa are gone. Harold Brock and Bob Sheridan and Fern Murphy are gone.

Who will call us back? Who will point us the way? Who will keep us on task? Who will call us back to our best selves? Who will call us back to the Lord?

We will! We must! The mantle has been passed to us. We must assume the role of defender of the church, defender of the people of God and our purpose. We must pick up the mantle and cry out: "Where is the Lord, the God of our fathers and mothers?" We must ask the Lord, the God of our fathers and mothers, to be present with us, to be in us and among us, in our time and place.

And we must pass it on. We must pass the mantle on to those who will be our successors.

There is an earlier story in the book of Kings, a story that tells of the first meeting between Elijah and Elisha. Young Elisha was out plowing the fields with a team of oxen when Elijah came up to him, took off his cloak and put it on Elisha. He placed his mantle on Elisha and Elisha left the team of oxen and his family and he followed Elijah. He became Elijah's helper, Elijah's apprentice. Elijah placed his mantle on Elisha and began preparing him for the day he would be gone, for the day Elisha would have to pick up the mantle he had left behind.

One day we will be gone. One day we will leave and the task of defending the church, of being the church, of being God's faithful people in the midst of this unfaithful world will fall to our successors. But we can leave in peace and pass on the task with confidence, because the power is not in us. The power we have, the success we enjoy, the mission we undertake, the vision toward which we strive, are the Lord's. It is the Lord's power, the Lord's mission, the Lord's vision, and we are the Lord's people.

The Lord who claimed us, the Lord who called us, will be there too for those who come after us. The mantle we pass on to them is the mantle of the Lord's calling. It is the mantle of the defenders of the Lord's people, and putting that mantle on the shoulders of those who come after us is one of the most important things we do.