

UMC of Auburn – 7/10/16

MESSAGE: “Grampa’s Mantle”

Text: II Kings 2:1-15

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to introduce myself to the Auburn congregation and to inspire pastor and congregation to ‘pick up’ the mantle of ministry opportunity that has been passed to us.

Introduction

- I. Exposition of Text
- II. Illustration: Introduction of Pastor Steve & Calling
- III. Application: Mantle as Mission (Let’s Pick It Up!)

Response to the Word

One of golf’s immortal moments came when a Scotchman demonstrated the new game to President Ulysses Grant. Carefully placing the ball on the tee, he took a mighty swing. The club hit the turf and scattered dirt all over the president’s beard and surrounding vicinity, while the ball waited motionless on the tee. Again the man swung, and again he missed. President Grant waited patiently through six tries and then quietly stated, “There seems to be a fair amount of exercise in the game, but I fail to see the purpose of the ball.” (*Campus Life*).

Sadly, that story describes the approach some take to life itself. They swing at it over and over, hoping for happiness, success, meaning, friendship, wealth, respect, fame—you name it, yet they come away empty, because they make no contact with the purpose for which they are created. Most of us, though, do have a purpose or passion that guides our decisions and choices and when that is identified, we become known to others. A good example is John Wesley who described his passion this way, “I want the whole Christ for my Savior, the whole Bible for my book, the whole Church for my fellowship and the whole world for my mission field.”

My plan for this message is to give you a glimpse of my passion for pastoral ministry and to invite you to join with me in an adventure of spiritual awakening and service. To do that, I ask you to meet me in the text of II Kings, chapter 2, verses 1- 15. Next to Moses, the prophet Elijah is considered the gold standard of Hebrew Testament prophets. When a Passover Seder is celebrated, for example, there is to this day a special place set for Elijah to join in the festivity. In the Gospels, Elijah and Moses are the ones who appear with Jesus when he is transfigured. Elijah is a big deal!

In the text we are reading, Elijah is taking his leave of this earth. His protégé, Elisha (similar names, but do not confuse the two) accompanies him and asks for a double-share of Elijah's spirit. Elijah gives him his mantle; Elisha picks it up and ignites a series of miracles that are nothing short of remarkable in the Hebrew Scriptures. He finds his passion, and the world is changed! Now, as we read this morning's text, I will be the narrator and voice of Elijah, and I ask you, as the congregation, to be the voice of the company of prophets. I also need someone to be the voice of Elisha, Elijah's protégé...

Read: II Kings 2:1-15 (NRSV).

Let us make a few observations together. Elijah's ministry is in eclipse. He has fulfilled his work and is ready to rest in God's mercy. It is his intention that Elisha will pick up where he has left off. In other words, change is at hand. Someone once said, "Change is the only evidence of life." It is normal to want things to remain comfortable, familiar, unchanged, but even the old, old hymns were once new to someone. I cannot be an effective Pastor Jackie or Pastor Rich or Pastor Russ, but I can be an effective Pastor Steve. In the words of the great theologian, Dolly Parton, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose."

Elisha knows change is coming, and he wants to be ready for it, so he accompanies Elijah on his journey. If he had any doubts about what is coming, he has plenty of people to remind him, "Do you know God is taking your Master away today?" We might feel it in another way, "Do you know the Bishop is taking your pastor away today?" Elisha replies, "Yes, but stop talking about it."

Upon reaching the Jordan River, Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up, like a staff, and strikes the water. It parts so that the two can pass through the river. This miracle display of power recalls the parting of the Sea of Reeds when the Israelites left slavery in Egypt. It also recalls the parting of the Jordan River, when Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land. It is a powerful symbol of the presence of God in Elijah's ministry.

Elijah wants to give his protégé a gift and asks Elisha what he would want to receive. Elisha requests a double-portion of his Master's spirit. It was customary in Hebrew tradition for the eldest son to receive from his father a double-portion of the inheritance. The reason for this, of course, was that the eldest son had responsibility for the family clan upon receiving that inheritance. My parents practiced this, too, when they set up their estate planning, by giving my older brother a double-portion of the inheritance since he was the one living adjacent to them and doing the lion's share of caring for them in their sunset years.

Elijah makes the gift conditional, “If you see me taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” In other words, that gift is in God’s hands, not Elijah’s. Elisha does, in fact, see Elijah caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire with horses of fire in a whirlwind (all of which symbolize the theophany or appearance of the divine). One thing is left behind: a mantle. Elijah’s mantle. A stole, or serving towel, if you will, but one that belonged to a prophet of Yahweh.

Elisha picks it up. Now let us pause for just a moment. To be candid, there are many mantles that do not get picked up. I was at a funeral service for a woman who was known by all to be a committed and faithful prayer-warrior, that is, one who prays continually for others. The pastor asked, “Who will now pray for the people Sadie prayed for?” Silence. There are many mantles that do not get picked up. Who will be the champion for peace now that Elie Weisel has passed? Who will evangelize now that Billy Graham has retired? Who will share the gospel? Who will provide medical assistance in Guatemala? Who will care for the least, the last, the lost? Who will comfort the families who grieve those killed by gun violence--black, white, gay, straight, police, civilian?

Elisha picks up the mantle. He returns to the Jordan, strikes the water with the mantle that is now his and says, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” He, himself, does no miracle, but the power of God flows through him and the water parts so he can cross over. When the company of prophets see this, they acknowledge, “The spirit of Elisha rests on Elijah!”

Please allow me to share my own mantle story. My father’s parents were both pastors. My grandmother was ordained in 1918, highly unusual then, and served a parish briefly before marrying my grandfather and supporting his ministry. My grandfather Eric, to be honest, was not a sterling preacher and he served small country churches throughout his ministry. He was a farmer-pastor, with a gift for pastoral care, and was also a man of uncompromising integrity. He inspired me, even as a young boy. When I left Sunday School one day, at the age of 6 or 7, after studying God’s call to Samuel, I felt a call to pastoral ministry. Grampa was my picture of what that meant.

His own journey to ministry had not been an easy one. In 1912, when he was fourteen and his older brother Glenn, 16, their sister Faith contracted the measles. The family was quarantined. His mother died two days before Christmas and his father on New Year’s Day. With Glenn, he was determined to keep his three younger siblings together with them on the family farm. A few months later, their house burned to the ground. Orphaned and homeless, with help from church and community, they fought their way back.

Like his parents, he, too, had five children. My Dad was third in the line-up. Grampa felt a call to pastoral ministry and juggled seminary with farming and raising five children. He attended Bangor Seminary, dropped out in 1929 during a period of clinical depression, but returned, graduated, and was ordained. During the 1930s, he served a church in Canterbury, New Hampshire. One of his parishioners was a man with a baritone voice who contributed a nickel to the plate each Sunday, except on the days he was singing a solo. On the Sundays he sang a solo, he did not give a nickel, because, he figured, the song was his offering. In my grandfather's diary, on a particular Sunday, he noted, "Today was a solo Sunday. Considering the quality of the solo, I think God would have preferred the nickel."

Grampa never made much money, but he was faithful in his work, even as a chaplain in his eighties. By then, Grandma had died, and Grampa had remarried, at the age of 85—to Thelma, a widow of one of his Bangor Seminary friends. His second son, my Uncle Eric, had become a pastor, too, but he was very proud when he learned that I would be following in their footsteps. He gave me his library, some of which Maynard and Peter graciously moved into my office this past week.

In 1990, on the eve of my graduation from Seminary, Grampa was too ill to attend my celebration party. Grandma Thelma came in his stead and presented me with his pulpit robe and a set of stoles. It is a gift deeply treasure. Later that week, he died at the age of 92. The first service I ever officiated at with that robe, or mantle as I prefer to call it, was my grandfather's funeral and graveside service. My uncle and I officiated together—both acutely aware of the symbolism of a mantle being passed from one generation to another. I stood at Grampa's grave, tears in my eyes, overcome, unable to speak. My two-year-old son, Eric, named after my grandfather, looked up at me and said, "But Daddy, he will be alive again!"

With that, Easter flooded my heart, and God's ministry through me began—a ministry fueled by a passion to help people encounter God authentically, without pretense, so they may grow up full-size into the dimensions of spiritual significance that God created them for. God gave me a brief poem of this mantle-passing that I would like to share with you...

Read "Grampa's Mantle."

On Memorial Sunday, a month ago, Pastor Jackie Brannen passed a mantle to me as well, one that I am picking up and pledging to honor with compassion and integrity. But others, also, have laid mantles down in faithful service to God through the mission and ministry of the United Methodist Church of Auburn. Some of them have been picked up, and I am deeply grateful to those of you who carry them. But others have not yet been picked up. What will you do with the mantle God has given you?