
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Make That a Double

A Sermon by

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Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-14

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Inheritance varies from culture to culture. Among the ancient Israelites, the eldest son, daughters don't inherit, receives twice as much as the other sons. In Islamic cultures, sons inherit twice as much as daughters. Only in a very few matriarchal cultures, do the daughters receive the greatest portion of the inheritance.

In the Nelson culture, the inheritance from our parents was much more egalitarian. My father died twenty years ago and my mother lived another fifteen years, along the way downsizing her worldly goods. By the time of her death, we all had agreed on what keepsakes each of the four children would like to inherit: the small grandfather clock that I remember growing up with, I think from my mother's side of the family, the dresser set from mom and dad's first purchase as a married couple, the small pieces of cut glass that hold the olives and pickles on holiday tables.

In the Elsenheimer culture, both mom and dad are still with us, yet they moved a few years ago to a smaller house and have been downsizing while they are still alive. They have embraced the bumper sticker model of "We're spending our kids' inheritance."

I think the grandchildren actually got first pick. Jessica chose the figurine of a guy flushing himself down the toilet, saying, "Good bye, cruel world!"

It was a cruel world in which Elijah and Elisha were called to be the keepers of the spiritual inheritance of God's people. Elijah ministered to the people in one of the lowest points in Israel's history. Remember the 'run for your life to the broom tree' from last week? From 1 Kings 19 to 2 Kings 2 of today, probably at least seven to eight years, Elijah and his co-pastor Elisha have battled against tyrant kings who have oppressed the most vulnerable among the people. Elisha, the younger man, gave up everything, abandoning his prosperous farm to become Elijah's personal servant, humbly attending to his needs, and accompanying him everywhere he went. Elisha spent year after year with him, and the goal wasn't just academic learning, but personal transformation. Elisha's heart was challenged and changed as he saw Elijah go to court, help the poor, bury the dead, redeem slaves, and in all things be a humble and caring person.¹

The reading today tells us that now the mantle is ready to be passed. Now the inheritance is ready to be paid forward. Change is on its way. One era is ending, Elijah's; the next, Elisha's, has not yet begun.

In a sermon preached to the 2009 graduating class of Duke Divinity School, Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells makes these comparisons to the 'about to become pastors' in the times we are in now. The Elijah days of old are like the 1960s, the whirlwind time, when the pastor and the church were somebody in our culture. In the '60s, "Churches still mattered, their leaders quite frequently marched at the head of the social movements of the time...the political language of the period, in the mouths of men like Dr. King, was drenched in theological rhetoric, and there really was a sense that people were coming out of the wilderness and may indeed reach the promised land sometime soon... Those were the glory days. A lot of us can't remember it, but boy do we hear about it all the time."²

¹ Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, Zondervan, p. 55.

² <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/inheriting-the-mantle?page=0,2>

Now we are in the Elisha time. The church has been pushed to the sideline. No longer is the church the center of the community, the conscience of the community, not even the charity of the community. After all, even the post office collects canned goods. Pastors have fallen from their pedestals, often at their own undoing, televangelists included.

“We are on the other side of the Jordan,” Dr. Wells preached. “We can’t go back to Elijah’s time, and we can’t spend our lives in the whirlwind. We can’t sit in grief and tear our garments and wish for those times. So what does it mean to pick up the mantle today?”³

If you were a seminarian like Jeremy Lopez, or our Judy Green-Davis, doing her internship at First Congregational, or our Andria Davis, just entering Chicago Theological Seminary this fall and beginning the journey as our student in discernment, what do you say to them about ministry today and into the next decades? Will the Church ever come back to those ‘60s days? Most say it never will, a baby boomer phenomena likely never to be repeated. What will be the ministry we will build for the future, for the Elishas out there who are just picking up the mantle of faith? Elisha, when he saw that Elijah was leaving him and that he would have to be the prophet from now on, he asked for a ‘double portion’ of Elijah’s power.

So, when I say ‘make it a double’, I’m not talking about bellying up to some bar. I’m talking about being intoxicated, if you will, with a spirit of faith that says, “I am a disciple. I have learned from a master. I have claimed my inheritance as a disciple of Christ, and I am passionate about building a community where people love one another, where relationships are built, where stories are shared, where we find we are more like one another than different from one another, where we find that we all share some basic, common hopes and dreams, where we ask one another in compassion and care “Is it well with your soul?”, where we commit to not judging one another: “My soul is better than your soul”, but to recognize we are soul mates, together on a spiritual journey.

Our spiritual journeys arise out of the trenches of our daily lives and living. United Church of Christ member Bill Moyers said in his keynote speech at the General Synod a few years ago: “There’s an awful war, and there’s terrorism, and there’s suffering and injustice of every kind, and this is our moment to be courageous in the face of it all. This is our moment to take up the story and live the call, the claim, of God upon our lives, to preach and live the good news of the gospel...when we come to worship, we recommit ourselves to the struggle.”⁴

It sounds like an Elisha time to me. It sounds like why Ted and I came to this church, this corner, 7th Avenue and Glendale, which really stretches down to 17th Drive and the Beatitudes Campus and Beatitudes Agelink and to our east building wherein dwells Duet: Partners in Health and Aging. This corner, which really stretches to Nicaragua and to 53rd Avenue and a Habitat House. This corner, which really stretches to ICM Food and Clothing Bank and to The Treasure Box truck pulling in and making food affordable to people who are close to choosing between food or other looming debts. This corner, which stretches its arms wide open to welcome All the People...no matter who you are...

³ <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/inheriting-the-mantle?page=0,2>

⁴ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/june-27-2010-thirteenth.html>

Are we perfect at it? Is it happening quickly enough to reach the people who are dying to hear a progressive, welcoming voice?

Is it easy to be the voice that is countercultural and says, “Abundance” when all other voices shout “Scarcity”?

I love this church and I love you, its people. I would not be here if I did not believe we have the gifts and the skills and the passion and the resources and the audacity to pick up the mantle, to claim our inheritance, to make it a double, to be a prophet like Elisha and create a new world. “To be a prophet is not to be a solitary figure standing at a distance in order to predict the future or call upon the judgment of the Lord. Rather, to be a prophet is to enter deeply into the realities and relationships of the people to whom you are sent.”⁵

I have been thinking about Jeremy a lot this week as he approaches his Ecclesiastical Council this afternoon. I was his supervisor this past year. I was Elijah and he was Elisha. What did I teach him? What did I model? Was I enough as a pastor to show him a way into ministry? What did I learn from him this past year? My ecclesiastical council was almost 30 years ago and I was a theological ‘baby’. I remember one pastor, retired, arrogant, cynical stood up and said, “Explain the Holocaust to us. Why did God cause the Holocaust?” I choked. I froze. I melted into my shiny new high heels. God bless one little old soul in the front row who whispered out loud, “God didn’t cause the Holocaust.” I said it louder for her, “God didn’t cause the Holocaust.” It was enough to center myself and remember why I was standing there in the first place, and why I continue to stand in a pulpit like this thirty years later. Because I have faith, and I think you have faith, and I think that together with all the other faith-ers, God’s world, our world, can be better than this. God has given us a double portion, more than we need, enough to be shared with generosity.

If Not Us, Then Who? If Not Now, When?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.

Amen.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, Year B. Volume 4, p. 437.