



“Taking Up the Mantle of Leadership”
Sermon by Rev. David Colby
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Have you ever known that someone who means the world to you is about to depart? If you have had that experience, you might have felt a longing to have one more chance to ask questions. “What was it like for you?” “If you could do it all over again, what would you change?” If you had the opportunity with someone, what would you be looking for in that final encounter? Would you seek a blessing, or listen for one last piece of wisdom? Or would you most need to hear words of forgiveness or encouragement?

We don't always get that final conversation. And even for those who do, old patterns are not easily ended. So we turn to the empty chair and ask for their opinion. We text a funny moment to that cell phone number that is memorized. We call when we are feeling lonely, wanting to hear their voice if only on an answering machine. We know that those are some of the things that people do when they are grieving. And so today's story gives us a bit of a kick in the pants, a reminder, to show our love now while we have the chance.

The Indigo Girls are a musical duo that have a song called “History of Us,” and within the lyrics are these words:

So we must love while these moments are still called today

Take part in the pain of this passion play

Stretched our youth as we must, until we are ashes to dust

Until time makes history of us.

Sometimes we have the sense that time is short, and the opportunity is there to be taken or missed for that final conversation. That one last opportunity to get a blessing. And it can really matter. Because life is hard and it is good to learn from those who have gone before us. Because life is hard and we need all the wisdom we can get. Because stories matter, and blessings have power.

Elisha has been living with and training as an apprentice under the prophet

Elijah. And our story for today begins at the end of their time together. And kind of like when hospice team members start encouraging family to gather, the company of prophets give young Elisha a heads up. "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" (2 Kings 2:3). Young Elisha has been at old Elijah's side and won't leave. And he responds to the concern shown by the company of prophets, "Yes, I know."

Elijah was such a strong leader. Wise. Courageous, steady. And now he is going to be taken away from Elisha.

More than once, old Elijah tells young Elisha to wait behind. And young Elisha refuses to leave him prematurely. But the company of prophets – fifty strong – watch from a distance as Elijah and Elisha approach the Jordan River. And scripture relays the first in a series of unusual occurrences. "Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground" (2 Kings 2:8).

If we had been reading some of the chapters that came before this, we would have heard about this mantle already. The word has a double meaning, referring both to a loose sleeveless garment but also, more generally, a symbol of authority. It is both a symbol of his power and may be a tool for his prophetic powers as well. Elijah is going to use his mantle and what he does with it is reminiscent of Moses leading the people through the sea while being chased by the Egyptian chariots and soldiers. Moses had used his staff to part the waters and lead the people to safety. No one is chasing the two

prophets, but Elijah rolls up the mantle, and uses it like a rod and strikes the river, and the waters part. And old Elijah and young Elisha crossed over for a private conversation while the company of prophets stood at a distance.

And there in that private space they have that chance for a final conversation.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not" (2 Kings 2:9-10).

Legend has it that Elijah did not so much die as he was taken up into the heavens. Something mysterious. Almost unexplainable. But the legend persists, so much so that we are reminded to leave a chair open for an unexpected guest or even the return of Elijah. A chariot of fire and horses of fire separate the two of them – where Elijah is going Elisha cannot follow.

And when Elisha could no longer see Elijah, he tore his clothes and cried out. And then he picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen. Now all alone, Elisha takes up this mantle, and walks back to the river. And Elisha tried the mantle thing. And the river waters parted for him and the company of prophets could see that suddenly the transfer of power had happened. The mantle had been picked up, and leadership had been transferred.

I think a lot about leadership in the church in challenging times. Especially so

this week as we prepare to give thanks for the life of the Rev. Judy Kolwicz. After she was ordained in 1982, in every single position of ministry in which she served, Judy was the first woman to serve in that position. The Presbyterian Church had been ordaining women to ministry as deacons since 1906 and elders since 1930 and ministers starting in 1956, yet it took a long time for churches and presbyteries to actually elect women and call them to specific pastoral openings. So Judy was a pioneer.

I so appreciated the opportunity to talk openly and directly with Judy about what it was like to be the first woman in all those positions. To reflect on what she was able to do differently with her style of leadership and also to learn about some of the criticism and obstacles she faced, the sexism that impacts women in leadership. To hear her stories with appreciation and to be able, at least from my vantage point, to be able to express an apology that the church had been hurtful, and then to think about the mantle of leadership she might pass on. To listen well, to problem-solve, to seek creative solutions to current challenges, to welcome and equip new leaders.

Of course, it is not just in the church that women in leadership face deeply ingrained sexism, nor is the church the only arena that needs good leadership. This week in some ways marked the start of a presidential campaign in this country, and two nights of debates featured twenty candidates trying to use the few minutes they had to talk about what they would do and why they felt called to lead, and what their leadership might look like.

And in these times in which we live, we need good leadership. The apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, talks about two competing sets of character traits. Coming at the end of what has been an angry letter from Paul to the Galatians, Paul makes a contrast between the works of the flesh (jealousy, anger, quarrels, factions, envy and the like) with the fruits of the spirit.

He is trying to set up a dichotomy between flesh and spirit that I think might have made more sense in the philosophy and culture of first century Rome than it does now. But I think we can recognize that we are living in a time when for too many, as Paul puts it, "freedom has become an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Galatians 5:13). I think we can recognize that we are living in a time when quarrels and factions are assumed, taken for granted. In a positive sense, we are encouraged to find our tribe - where we will be understood and supported. But the downside is that there is an assumed tribalism. Those people and our people, them and us. And then you add on some layers to this polarized tribalism and this time seems to be filled with people willing to return evil for evil. Kicking others when they are down. Around the world corruption is on the rise and people in places of authority are brazenly lying when it serves their purpose. Like Paul in the first century, we can understand what it feels like when jealousy and fornication and impurity and licentiousness and idolatry are given free reign.

And rather than engaging in a tit for tat, or a "get strong because might makes right" mentality, Paul encourages the church to instead pursue what he calls "the fruits of the spirit." Starting with themselves and

spreading outward. To cultivate and encourage and harvest the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Underlying these closing exhortations of Paul in this letter is a belief that as Christians we are not to be passive participants, but can help shape this world around us.

Sometimes it helps to hear stories from a different cultural setting to better see the truths about our own cultural setting. In the latest installment in a wonderful book series set in Botswana called the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, the main character, Mma Ramotswe is approached by a very persuasive friend, Mma Potokwane, who is the head matron at an orphanage. As the leader of an orphanage, her friend is used to twisting arms to do necessary good. And so Mma Potokwane, the head of the orphanage, encourages Mma Ramotswe, quite content with her life as a detective and spouse, to stand for a vacant city council seat. The author Alexander McCall Smith lets us into the mind of this wonderful woman presented with what she heard as a startling suggestion.

It was difficult to argue with Mma Potokwane once she had espoused a cause, and Mma Ramotswe had barely tried. Eventually, as her old friend had seen her out to her van, she had conceded that she would think about the possibility of standing as a candidate. "I am not the right person for that sort of thing, Mma," she said. 'But at least I shall think about what you have said today.' Her words were carefully chosen. She would think about it, and thinking about doing something was very far from agreeing to do it. In fact, thinking about something was often a prelude to deciding that you could

not possibly do it; and that, she felt, was the inevitable outcome here.

Mma Ramotswe had thought she could say no to politics, but instead, found herself arm-twisted into being on the ballot. The other candidate was promising people the moon, the stars and the sun, promising things that a city council member would not even have authority to do. It was decided that posters were needed for the final days of the campaign. In a campaign meeting filled not with professional strategists but auto mechanics and fellow detectives, the candidate herself came up with the wording that would be used on posters. "I would like to say, I am Mma Ramotswe. I am not much, but I promise you I'll do my best. Those are the words I want." And so those were the words that were printed on campaign posters and you will have to read *The Colors of All the Cattle* to find out what happened in that election.

But for this morning, let me close by asking you to think on these questions. Is there a mantle of leadership that has fallen to the ground and must be picked up? Is there a role for us in our troubled times? Is it too late for the fruits of the Spirit to blossom and flourish? Can we hear these stories as an invitation, not to be a bystander, but to take up the mantle of leadership?

Christie Rachele, our Communications and Publications Director, pointed me to a quote from Warren Bennis, who was a scholar and organizational consultant. He once wrote, and I agree,

The point is not to become a leader. The point is to become yourself, to use

*yourself completely, all your skills, your gifts,
and your energies, in order to make your
vision manifest. You must withhold nothing.
You must, in sum, become the person you
started out to be, and to enjoy the process of
becoming.*

May it be so. Amen.

1. Here I may have a slight disagreement, for I believe that the mantle is more than just a symbol of power, as Kathleen Robertson Famer summarizes in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 3 – Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16), David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 175.
2. Alexander McCall Smith, The Colors of All the Cattle in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency Series (New York, Pantheon Books, 2018) 27.
3. Ibid., 177.
4. Warren Bennis, On Becoming A Leader, originally published in 1999.