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“Passing the Mantle”

Yesterday, I went to the gay Pride event in Portsmouth. There was a parade, vendors, and live music. When I arrived, a young woman was going to the stage with her guitar. She was a high school student from South Berwick. She announced that she had never performed in front of an audience before. Everyone clapped and showed their support.

As I was standing there watching, a young man came up to me. I’m guessing he was eight or nine years old. He offered me a button that you pin to your clothes. It had the name of some medical office on it. I couldn’t hear a word he was saying because the music was so loud. I asked, “Are you giving this to me?” He said, “Yes, it’s free.” You know my motto: If it’s free, it’s for me.”

Being around that crowd of young people reminded me of an experience in a previous church. Some of you have heard this. Years ago, I served a church that became Open & Affirming while I was there. The process, which I assume was similar to this church’s ONA process, took nearly 2 years. There were educational opportunities and opportunities for people to share how they felt about it.

When it came time for the special church meeting, in which a vote would be taken, almost every active youth in the church showed up for the meeting. Now, I have to share with you why that made such an impact on me. In the years I’ve been a pastor, I’ve attended 30 or 40 church meetings. I can’t remember ever seeing youth at a church meeting, never mind the entire youth group, unless one or two of them were asked to come specifically to do something.

That was one church. It was a small sample size. I know there are some who are not enamored with ONA, but in my experience, the next generation is. That experience made a big impact on me, because I have never seen youth show up to a church meeting excited to exercise their right to vote, before or since.

This is not a sermon about the pros and cons of being Open and Affirming. I only mention this, because it did my heart good to see the youth in the church excited about the church. Not only do vital churches tend to be intergenerational churches, I’m a believer

that salvation comes to us on the way to someone else. Faith is for handing down. Every generation has a responsibility to the one that comes next.

I believe that's what we see in our text. The prophet Elijah came onto the scene at a low point in the nation of Israel's history. Towards the end of King Solomon's reign, Solomon began promoting the worship of idols. He instituted slavery as a means of completing his ambitious building projects. He took numerous wives in order to enter into unholy alliances with other nations.

With the rulers that succeeded Solomon, things went from bad to worse. God's response was to raise up prophets, like Elijah, to call the nation back to fidelity to Israel's God, to care about the things God cares about: to care for the poor, to liberate the oppressed, and to repent of their sin.

Elisha was a disciple of the prophet Elijah. Our text describes the end of Elijah's prophetic ministry. The two prophets were walking and talking, when a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

Elisha began to grieve. When Elijah disappeared from sight, Elisha grabbed his clothes and tore them in two pieces. That's an indication of someone in the grieving process. As I picture the scene, I imagine Elisha looking toward heaven, dropping to his knees, and weeping.

Elisha was all alone. The work his mentor began was now in his hands. It was all up to him. I think this text provides a great opportunity for us to think about how each of us empowers those who come after us. I hate to say it, but you and I won't be here forever. The moment will come when each of us is taken up into heaven. Allow me to share with you a few things from the story of Elijah and Elisha that can bring meaning to whatever time you and I have left.

First, Elijah made it part of his ministry to mentor the next generation. His work wasn't complete without empowering someone to carry on the work in his absence. Let me explain it this way. Some of you know I was on vacation last week. I went on a motorcycle trip with a friend of mine.

At one point, we found ourselves in a long line of traffic. We were slowly making our way when I decided to look in my rearview mirror. When I looked in my mirror, I saw a

police car trying to pass me. I didn't hear the siren, because of my helmet and the noise of my bike, but I saw the blue lights in my mirror.

When riding a motorcycle, it's important to check the rearview mirror often in order to see who's coming up behind you. That officer needed to get ahead of me. Because I checked my rearview mirror, I realized something important was happening up ahead. I realized it was necessary for me to pull over and let the police officer pass and get to their destination.

Let me ask you. As you ride down the road of your life, who is in your rearview mirror? Who is coming up behind you? I think this is a great question for every person in the church to ask. If you chair a committee or if you have any role in the church no matter how small, who's going to succeed you? Who will take over for you when it's time to step down? Who are you equipping to do that task?

Some of you know it can be an extremely rewarding aspect of one's spiritual life to share a ministry. It provides an opportunity to really get to know another person. I once heard of a senior pastor telling his staff they weren't to do any ministry alone. If they visited someone in the hospital, they were to bring another person so that person would then be able to make a hospital visit. Anyone who hosted coffee hour was to invite someone else to host with them, so they would learn how it was done. If you do anything, you invite someone along. That way everyone is being equipped to do ministry all the time. Ownership of the church is then passed along to the next generation.

Elijah made it part of his life's work to empower the next generation to carry on his mission. When was the last time you checked your rearview mirror? Who's coming up behind you? Who are you equipping to do the ministry in which you are presently engaged?

Another aspect of the text of which to take note is the conversation between the two prophets. Elijah instructed Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." You tell me. What do I have, that you need? To which Elisha responded, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." This raises the question, what will one generation leave to the next?"

Elijah's time on this earth came to an end. Elisha was left all by himself. He grieved the loss of his mentor. The turning point came when Elisha picked up the mantle that fell from Elijah. Now, the mantle was a cloak. It was the outer garment Elijah wore. That

mantle was a symbol of God's power and presence. Previously, Elijah parted the Jordan River by rolling up the mantle and striking the water with it.

Anyone who knows Israel's story, would make a connection to Moses. Moses had a staff that represented the power and presence of God. He used his staff to part the Red Sea allowing the Hebrew people to escape from slavery. The message is that just as the power of God was available to Moses, it was available to Elijah.

When Elijah ascended into heaven, he left behind his mantle. Elisha picked it up off the ground. He rolled it up. He struck the water with it, and said, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When Elisha struck the Jordan, the water parted, and he crossed to the other side.

I know that none of us are Old Testament prophets with the ability to part bodies of water. But I believe each of us has something to pass along to the next generation. Some of us have substantial financial resources that can make the difference in a young person getting an education or starting a business.

Some of us have the ability to mentor a younger person and simply be a steady presence in the life of someone who needs it. There's no telling how sharing your skill as a leader or a gardener, or sharing your passion for history or for social justice could open doors for another person who does not have the experience you have.

One never knows what a difference something said to a granddaughter will make. One never knows what an encouraging word to a young boy will mean to him. One has no way of knowing what a difference a little bit of guidance can make in someone's life.

I'm going to ask you a piece of biblical trivia. If you were at the Wednesday morning Bible study you already know this. In the book of 1 Kings, Elijah performed seven miracles. How many miracles did Elisha perform in the book of 2 Kings? Can you guess?

The answer is 14. He asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit and he was able to perform twice the number of miracles...all because Elijah made it part of his religious life to mentor the next generation. Elijah left something behind allowing his disciple to flourish.

I'll leave you with this. Recently, I went to Anthony's Food Shop with my nephew. It was crowded and chaotic. We got our food and went to leave. I walked out the door first

and held it for my nephew. He looked behind him and saw a woman coming out. So, he held the door for her.

However, right on her heels, there was another person. So, he held the door for that person. He just kept holding the door. One woman looked behind her as she came and said, "You're going to be holding that door a long time." To which my nephew said, "I'll hold this door as long as it takes."

Folks, we're in the business of opening doors for those who come behind us.

So, check your rearview mirror.

Be ready to allow someone to pass you.

Because salvation and joy and fulfillment and grace come to us on the way to the next generation.