

The Blessings of a Hand-Me-Down

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Service for Commissioning Provisional Members and Recognition of Retirees

While all disciples of Jesus Christ are called to ministry, there are a few who are chosen to be set apart to make their call a high priority. There are a few who have discerned that their call is such that it mandates that they request to be a member of this annual conference as an elder or deacon. They have discerned that it is their time to declare their allegiance to the United Methodist Church as the place they know that God has chosen them to live out their call. They have discerned, along with the church, that it is their season to receive the mantle.

So we are here to praise God for the men and women who are entering into this season of call that is called commissioned member. During this time those who are commissioned will continue to integrate what they have learned and are learning through formal studies and life experiences. They will continue to grow in their faith and commitment to the mission of the United Methodist Church.

Conversely, there comes a time in the life of clergy persons when they discern that their particular call of being employed by or on behalf of the church is no longer primary in their lives. There comes a time when clergy persons discern that time with their spouse, or children or grandchildren or time spent just on themselves, their health, their own recreation, or perhaps a new vocation must take priority over their employment by or on behalf of the church. Some times this discernment takes place after a short while in ministry, sometimes it takes place after a long career. And sometimes the discernment is helped by a letter from the

general church saying you must retire because you have reached the mandatory age of retirement. However it happens, no matter how it happens, or when it happens, there comes a time when clergy persons discern that it is their season to pass the mantle.

So here we are to praise God for the men and women who have discerned not an end to their call to ministry, but a new season in that call - a season that mandates a shifting in priorities - a season which we in the church call retirement.

I believe that Elijah and Elisha might have something to teach us about how we all might respond together to this blessed time in the life of this annual conference. They might have something to say to us about the the blessings of a hand me down. But before we look to Elijah and Elisha for a lesson, let's look to Stella and Sam. (video clip)

The blessing of a hand me down.

Elijah was a good and faithful prophet. His cloak had seem many adventures. Elijah performed some mighty miracles bringing down fire and rain. Through his miracles he demonstrated that Yahweh provides the things that sustain life - wind, rain, fire. His cloak had some mighty adventures.

Elijah throughout his ministry taught the ethics of the God of Israel and how Yahweh's ethics were superior to the ethics of any of the gods worshipped in the ancient world. Elijah taught that Yahweh is on the side of the poor and powerless. Elijah taught that God will call into account those who use their power, even when they have the law on their side, those who use their power for their own gain or to oppress the other. His cloak had some mighty adventures.

Elijah was a good and faithful prophet who performed mighty miracles and taught faithfully the ethics of God. Yet this man who had done so much for God, was just that, a man. And so in his humanness, Elijah became tired and depressed.

Elijah lost faith that the God who Elijah had proven was the sustainer of life would sustain his own life. And Elijah ran and hid in fear.

But even though Elijah took a break in a cave to indulge his fear, God did not abandon him. God continued to search him out and speak to him over and over until he got the message. Now I could do a whole sermon on why Elijah was expecting to hear God in the wind. I could talk about the fact that sometimes God's spirit needs to blow through with such power that we literally become breathless in order for us to believe it's God. I could do a whole other sermon on why Elijah was expecting God to speak in the earthquake. I could talk about the fact that sometimes God needs to shake the very foundations of who we think we are in order to speak to us. I could do a whole sermon on why Elijah was expecting God to speak through the fire. I could talk about the fact that sometimes God needs to burn some stuff up in us in order for us to have enough clarity to hear from God. Or I could talk about the fact that sometimes God needs to light a fire up under us to get us to go to the places that God needs us to go in order to do the things God needs us to do. But today we are talking about the blessing of hand me downs.

Here is the curious thing. It was not until Elijah heard silence that he wrapped his mantle around his face and went to stand at the entrance of the cave. There was no wind, so there was no debris flying around from which he needed to protect his face. There was no earthquake, so there were no rocks falling from which he needed protection. There was no fire, so no need to cover his mouth and nose to protect himself from the smoke. There was no earthly reason why Elijah needed to wrap his face in his mantle. I believe it was the unction of the Spirit of God that had Elijah wrap his mantle around his face. Elijah needed to wrap his face in the mantle so that God could touch and bless that mantle as God came by. So

that when Elijah put that mantle around Elisha's shoulders Elijah was giving Elisha a mantle that had been kissed by God. Oh, the blessings of a hand me down.

Collectively the this class of retirees has over 630 years of ministry. Each one of the retirees has been in places and spaces where God has passed by. They have some cloaks, some mantles that have been kissed by God. I urge you to read about them and ask them questions about their ministry. They have blessings to pass down to not just our new class of commissioned folks, but to all of us. Don't wiggle around like the dog trying to resist the hand me down. I urge you to accept eagerly their hand me downs.

If you are the oldest child you have no idea of the trauma that a hand me down can cause. If you have an older same gender sibling, allow me to redeem the hand me down by reminding us all of what Elisha was able to do with the blessings of a hand me down. Elisha became the leader of the prophets, shaping and teaching them. So it could be said that with the blessing of a hand me down Elisha called and developed principled leaders. Elisha performed many miracles by allowing for the feeding of widows and 100 people during a famine. So it could be said that with the blessing of a hand me down Elisha did ministry with the poor. Elisha provided for Naaman, the Aramaean's healing. So it could be said that with the blessing of a hand me down Elisha did the work of dismantling racism and created new spaces for new people to worship. Elisha revived the Shunammite woman's son. So it could be said that with the blessing of a hand me down, Elisha worked to promote abundant health.

Oh the blessing of a hand me down.

Here is another blessing of the mantle. It is a fine mantle. It has been well made and has been kissed by God. So it is guaranteed to last until Christ comes again in final victory. Until that time, it is your job to make sure that your mantle does not get buried with you. It is your job, the job of all of us, to make sure that

we pass our mantle down to the next generation of leaders, to the little birdies in the nest.

Part of our call, perhaps one of the most important parts of our call, is to listen to God - listen to the silence - to hear who God has appointed for us to pass on our mantle. The job of every disciple is to help others discern their call and then to find as many ways as possible to bless them in that call.

To our retirees. Thank you for keeping the mantle so well. Enjoy this new season of your life. Be blessed by God. To our new commissioning class. The mantle is now yours. It has been kissed by God. Take it, use it, use it to perform miracles. But don't hold on too tight, because it is only yours for a season. I urge you to begin today listening for who God is calling to receive your mantle.