

The Mantel

“Pass it on.”

2 Kings 2:5-15

Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes #4

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Big Picture

When I was a kid I used to wonder at the whirlybird maple seeds that fell from the big trees outside our house. Down they would come from the branches and twirl in the air like helicopters, hovering and drifting with the course of the wind to fall to the earth someplace, anyplace, sometimes far from the tree. Then my friends and I would pick them up and limb to the top of the swing-set or my friend's clubhouse roof and drop them to watch the rotors spin and work them through the air all over again. They were marvelous inventions of nature, I thought; yet I never wondered over them beyond the point of being a natural toy.

This year Laura decided that she wanted a vegetable garden, so we cleaned out a spot that looks like it had been a garden before, took a sample of soil down to a nearby garden store and were given directions for fertilizing and cultivating the soil – making it ready to support healthy and wholesome tomatoes. It took a lot of work to produce a hundred square feet of cleared and tilled soil to be ready for the planting. It must have sent invitations to all the nearby maple trees that challenge the name of our fair city (Royal Oak).

Thousands of seeds had buzzed their way aloft in the air to gather on our enriched patch of micro-farmland.

I had more work to do. We needed to get every seed removed. I bought a new leaf blower and after exhausting three-and-a-half batteries came to the end of the work. The evidence of only a few seeds remained after the hurricane winds I produced. These needed removal by hand; so I stooped and drew each from the soil. That is when my wonder over them widened.

God's genius had produced a tree to evolve whose seeds worked with the air and the earth to become tiny darts. They landed nose-first into the soil and somehow worked their way deeper and deeper into the ground where, aided by the moister and nutrients of the earth, they already sprouted roots to become a living little tree.

And I did wonder: how God had fit the seeds with the earth and wind and every other organism so they worked together to produce this living world.

Have you ever wondered how God has created us to fit together in this human world? One person interacting with another and with yet another so that a world with six-and-a-half billion people might live together in a world community: it's said that we are only 6 persons away from knowing everyone in the world. You know someone who knows someone else who knows someone else – and six people deep you can get to anyone and everyone else in the world, with a possible exception of some small, isolated tribe that lives in Indonesia or the Amazon. We fit together. And we fit together so that one generation prepares the next, and the next generation so challenges the older as to keep their minds sharp and growing well into old age.

A wonder: and have you ever wondered how God has used the persons around you to teach you and influenced you, and have you thought about who made you what you are today? And have you ever wondered who you are making into someone for tomorrow? I think it's all a part of God's design...like maple seeds, the earth and the air.

Throwing the Mantel

God made something of Elisha because God made something of Elisha and Elijah. There is a story of two generations of great prophets. The one became a mentor of the other. Yet, their relationship wasn't something that happened by chance, as though neither put forth any effort yet it just happened. The story you heard so far this morning was only about the culmination of their partnership, the end of Elijah's time on the earth and the point of transition where Elisha had to carry on without him.

The beginning of their story together started with Elijah practicing virtually alone. He was the prophet who challenged the prophets of Baal: one against 700. He was the one who predicted a drought and brought a kind widow's son back to life. He was the one who thought he was in danger and all alone when after a wind, and an earthquake, and fire God finally spoke to him in sheer silence. All of this he did and experienced and learned while he was going solo.

After that he didn't go solo anymore. Obeying what he heard in the silence, he went down found Elisha, a wealthy farmer plowing his field with 12 yoke of oxen (and no doubt blowing away sycamore seeds from the soil) and as he passed by he threw his

mantel over the young farmer's shoulders.¹ From that moment on, Elijah was a mentor to Elisha.

God fit them together. The younger pursued the older, hungry to learn. The older, recognizably a prophet with the stature of Moses himself taught the younger and modeled for him the way of the prophet.

Notice: it wasn't that Elisha heard about Elijah first, and first had wanted to be just like him. We treat mentoring relationships like that these days a lot. As though the younger is merely a consumer of what the older has to give. You become a mentor only if you're attractive enough and can draw attention to yourself enough to attract a following. It happened in reverse. Elijah called Elisha. The older chose the follower, like he had something that just had to be passed on.

I think knowing that makes this scene at the River all-the-more impressive. Several times Elijah invites Elisha to turn back. But the relationship molded by the older has drawn in the younger. There is a love there, and even more, I believe, the mission has bonded them. They travel together to the end.

Then they come to the River and Elijah rolls his mantel so it will work like the rod Moses used when God parted the Red Sea. He slaps it down on the riverbank and the waters here move apart so they can walk across it. And they enter together into the territory where Moses died.² Elijah asks his protégé if there's any request, and Elisha asks for a double share of the older prophet's spirit – it was like asking for the status and power the oldest son would inherit from a dying father.³ "It's not a request I can decide," says the older prophet. It was something that only God could do. Elijah had given all he could: his insight and wisdom, his experience and knowledge. Now it was up to God and Elisha how it would be used.

Then the heavens open and the chariots and horses of fire come down. They carry off the elder one, leaving the young prophet with his cries. Now he is solo, except for the wisdom and knowledge and God. Solo, except for something of Elijah that still remained within him. Solo, except for the mantel that was left behind. And he picks it up and goes back to the River; he rolls the mantel, perhaps so it will work like the rod Moses used, and he slaps the riverbank and the River interrupts its flow; he walks across, now the greatest prophet in the land.

I sometimes tell some of this story at funerals. Isn't it true that something of the people who have touched our lives wants to live on through us? Isn't it true that we

stand on their shoulders and continue on with their pursuits? It's like something of their ministry has become our ministry and something of the mission God gave them gets carried out in the mission God gives us.

If that's true, then what if something of your insight and wisdom, and something of the mission God has given you wants to carry on in those you come to mentor? What if there is someone God wants you to choose? Whether it's your own children or grandchildren or a co-worker or a neighbor, what if God's voice like the voice in Elijah's silence is calling you into intentional mantel-passing?

Last week I spoke with a young pastor who is new to the United Methodist Church. He went to Annual Conference last weekend, where the time frame usually makes it hard for many of our younger members to participate, so it looked to him that the average age of United Methodists has grown even older than it has become. Yet, what he said to me still seemed very wise.

He said that in his life he was blessed by his grandparents. He said that where his parents' expectations might be at times severe and lacking sensitivity, his grandparents love was very wide. It was with them that, most of all, he knew he was precious; and it was from them that he most easily accepted the wisdom of those who were older.

He said that if the United Methodist Church is to grow, we need to be grandparents to the young.

Wide love.

It is what that need. It is what will nurture them in the faith as children of God.

In other words, whether you are 80 or 28, you have a mantel to throw on the shoulders of one God wants to raise up. You have wisdom to share and a mission to pass on. Who is it? Who is God telling you to find?

Listen

Shh.

Listen.

You may have seeds to plant.

References

- [1] 1 Kings 19:19-21
- [2] Choon-Leong Seow, "The First and Second Books of Kings," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. III. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1999. p 176.
- [3] Ibid.