

A Faithful Response
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February 19, 2012

2 Kings 2:1-12

¹Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

⁴Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

⁶Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then 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.

⁹When 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.” ¹⁰He 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.” ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

While the main characters of this morning’s readings are Elijah and Jesus, it is Elisha and Peter who get the most lines. Elisha, at the end of 1 Kings, was plowing a field when Elijah was walking by and threw his mantle, a cloak-like garment, the same one we hear about today, over Elisha’s shoulders and then kept walking. Stranger still, Elisha catches up to Elijah, says, “Let me say good-bye to my parents

and then I'll follow you." And that's exactly what he does. Without question or any explanation, Elisha obediently becomes a disciple of the prophet Elijah. When we read that Elisha asked Elijah for a double-share of his spirit, that from which Elisha prophesies, he wasn't being greedy or cryptic. A double-share of an inheritance was traditionally passed from father to the eldest son, signifying the eldest as the true heir. Elisha is asking Elijah to make official Elisha's status as the next prophet. Elisha was able to do as requested and so, in watching Elijah ascend into heaven, he became the prophet above all prophets.

What follows this morning's reading are stories of Elisha picking up Elijah's mantle, which fell from the sky as he was lifted up, re-tracing Elijah's steps across the Jordan and through Israel, raising a boy from the dead, and feeding one hundred people with a limited amount of food. All because he chose to follow Elijah, and so follow God, without question; all a form of trusting response to Elijah's, and God's, call upon him.

And then, then, we have Peter. Poor Peter. Throughout the gospels only Thomas and his doubt are more associated with uncertainty in response to the truth Jesus brings than Peter. Whereas Elisha had not witnessed for himself the power of Elijah and yet followed, Peter, in the gospel before today's reading, had witnessed Jesus raise a young girl from the dead. He had proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah and then turned around and rebuked Jesus for what he said must happen to the Son of Man, and received one of the sharpest replies: "Get behind me, Satan!"

During the transfiguration, poor earnest Peter misses the otherworldly significance of the moment and tries instead to bring it down to earth, literally, by offering to build dwellings for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. I always sympathize with Peter when this reading comes around. He meant well but we, the readers, know how far off the mark he was and that moment is recorded for history to serve as a teaching moment on mornings like this one.

In the gospel of Mark, after the transfiguration, Peter feels compelled to remind Jesus that he and his friends left everything to follow Jesus, as if seeking a pat on the back or a reward of some kind. Peter has had explained to him the meaning of the destruction of the temple - more inside knowledge of Jesus' greatness. Then his denial of Christ is foretold, which he vows will not be true; he falls asleep while waiting for Jesus at Gethsemane, and then he does exactly what he insisted would not happen - he denies Christ three times before the morning.

Elisha seems to have held the double-share of trust, leaving the Peter we read about today with little or nothing. Both believed in the ones they followed; their responses both showed measures of faithfulness with Elisha simply demonstrating a more steadfast assuredness. We know Peter goes on to form the church through the existing Jewish community of believers - he wasn't a slacker when it came

to carrying out his commission - it just took him a while longer to live into his life of faith.

Our faithful responses to Christ likely fall somewhere between Elisha and Peter. With a teenager in the house we talk about growth spurts and slower growth. Elisha had a spiritual growth spurt, jumping quickly to his full spiritual maturity. Peter was slower, taking a good deal of time to reach an eventual spiritual maturity. Myself leaning more toward Peter's style, I look for marks of change, not quite milestones of progress - more like inch-stones.

There are many ways we can grow in our faith, many ways we can respond faithfully to Christ's call upon us. We can study our Bibles or even just read them with some regularity. We can join in the Christian fellowship of the church. We can serve those in need, through the church or through other avenues. Notice, these all involve giving. We give our time that could be spent elsewhere reading or spending time with people from church or in shelters or soup kitchens or schools. And, in giving, we grow in understanding a little more of what it means to serve God through serving our neighbors, to love God and to love our neighbors.

Giving to God what we might rather keep for ourselves is a reflection of being a good steward of the time we are given. Giving to God what we might rather keep for ourselves is a reflection of being a good steward of the talents we are given. Giving to God what we might rather keep for ourselves can also be a reflection of being a good steward of the finances we are given. All are important when it comes to serving God through serving our neighbors. And in giving any of them, we grow a little closer to God and we grow a little more like Christ.

Our stewardship Sunday is coming next week. As we prepare for that important spiritual decision, each of us will be reflecting specifically on the question, "What is God calling me to give as a percentage of my income?" That is a personal, spiritual question, and three kinds of people answer it in three different ways.

Some people answer it by saying, "I feel God is calling me to give ten percent of my income to the Lord's work. I have been thinking about tithing for several years, and I want to begin that spiritual journey this year."

Another kind of person responds to the question like this: "Eventually, I want to begin tithing, but I am not ready to do that this year. I feel God is calling me to start somewhere - five percent or six percent or four percent or one percent - knowing that God will bless that decision by helping me to increase my giving in coming years."

A third kind of person has been tithing for many years. For example, one couple said years ago when they were just getting started, "We'll tithe now; later we'll do more." The years rolled by and now they say, "Wow! Do we ever have more! So much more that we cannot fathom how we arrived at such

a high annual income that ten percent does not even come close to a sacrifice for us. We feel God is calling us to give fifteen percent or twenty percent of our income to the Lord's work."

Forbes magazine tells about Hugh and Nancy McFarland, Jr., who have been giving away seventy percent of their income for eighteen years, since Hugh was thirty-nine (*Forbes*, December 15, 1997). Seventy percent. Should the McFarland's pastor limit stewardship teaching to a ten percent concept? Probably not!

As we prepare for our stewardship Sunday, I hope each of us will be praying for God's guidance as we prepare to answer the spiritual question, "What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?" Whether you choose to pledge a specific amount next week or not, I encourage you to ponder the question in a broad context, "What percentage of my life is God calling me to give? Of my time? Of my talents? Of my treasures?"

Let us pray: God, we give you great thanks for the gifts with which you have richly blessed us, some financial, some with skills, some with the gifts of friendship. We pray for your guidance as we seek to hear how you are calling us to use our gifts in ways that will help us grow to know you more. Amen.