

June 26, 2010  
United Church of Northfield

Giving and Claiming the Mantle  
Rev. Roger L. Brown

Introduction Quote about John Calvin

In 1536 Reformer William Farel recruited John Calvin to come to Geneva, Switzerland to pastor St. Peter's Church. Calvin, a sickly man all his life, was on his way to Strasbourg to be a quiet scholar, but he relented under this need, this request, to become a pastor.

Two years later, the city fathers publicly banished Calvin from Geneva. Actually, Calvin felt relieved. The moral chaos of the city was terrible. He went to Strasbourg. Three years later in 1541, the same city fathers who had tried to humiliate him begged Calvin to return and help restore order.

He didn't want to go to Geneva this second time, either, "yet," he wrote, "because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord."

This became the motto of Calvin's life. His emblem would include a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, *prompte et sincere* ("promptly and sincerely"). Promptly and sincerely Calvin answered a call to very difficult task.

Comment on Calvin's Life

Certainly John Calvin had a crazy quilted career in which he was called first to one place, then rejected, called to another, only to be called back to Geneva, the city which had sent him away. While his initial calling to ministry at the church in Geneva came as the result of a mentor William Farel, a closer look at his career shows an early willingness to change direction. For his early training and work was in the law, not in ministry. In some respects his goals for the transformation of the Christian faith were more wide and fundamental than the matter of changing the worship and organizational structure of the church in Geneva. His multi-volume treatise on the church and the Christian faith, *The Institutes of the Christian Faith*, for which he is most famous, were being revised and issued in new editions regardless of his setting in ministry. So, even though he was ministering in a specific place, his calling to change the religious establishment was the more fundamental one.

Scripture Connection

Our Old Testament scripture this morning is a similar story of change in life direction. It is the story of the prophet Elijah and his successor, Elisha. (These two names sound almost the same, so be careful not to get them confused!) Our text is the closing chapter in the ministry of Elijah and the opening chapter in the ministry of his protégé, Elisha. This morning we will look at their story and the matter of passing on the mantle and the matter of claiming the mantle for one's self. This story of prophet and successor demonstrates the common struggle of claiming a new call and letting go of one role in life for another. Now, let us look at the story in detail and see what it may have to teach us.

A Detailed Look at the Text

This is a story that might have been named, "The Long Goodbye."

Elisha is Elijah's successor, and on the mountain God sent Elijah back home to call Elisha to succeed him. As our text begins, Elisha is following Elijah like a dutiful pupil. He doesn't seem ready to go off on his own. God is about to take Elijah up to Heaven. God seems to be saying to Elijah, "your work on Earth is done, Elijah, it's time." But Elijah, the senior prophet isn't convinced his journey is over. He tells Elisha that he has yet to go to Bethel. Even though Elijah tells Elisha, the junior prophet to let him go on alone, Elisha comes with him – he can't seem to let go of Elijah. When Elijah gets to Bethel, the two have

the same discussion again as Elijah, the senior prophet, tells Elisha that he is not done yet, because he's got to go on to the Jordan.

Then, when they get to the Jordan, Elijah rolls up his mantle, strikes the Jordan with it, and walks to the other side. This is quite a dramatic gesture. Only Moses before him had parted the sea and walked across. While we don't know why Elijah does this, or why he wants to get to the other side of the Jordan, but it seems to me that Elijah is trying to prove something to himself and Elisha. He might be saying, "see, I may be old, and almost at the end of my ministry, but I've still got what it takes!"

Then, just before Elijah has his chariot ride into Heaven, Elijah ask Elisha, the junior prophet if he can give him a parting gift. Elisha asks for an almost impossible gift – a double portion of Elisha's spirit. Suddenly, Elisha, the senior prophet rides away in his fiery chariot, and he is gone. We never learn for sure if Elisha gets the double portion or not.

Then in a dramatic and powerful moment, Elisha, the junior prophet, picks up the mantle, rolls it up and strikes the Jordan. Shazzm! The waters part and he walks across to the other side. –p-- It is as if he's testing out his new status as the senior prophet. You can imagine him thinking to himself, if God has really made me the new prophet, let me try this out to see if he gave me all the powers that go with the job. The waters miraculously part, and Elisha crosses over and heads back home to carry out his ministry.

### Connect to Life Transitions

This is a telling story. For like Elijah, we are not always ready to make the changes God has in mind. It may be time, according to God, to make some changes in our life, and we don't make the transition without some adjustment time. I know of one man who retired about a year ago from a management position. Now, intentionally, he returns part-time in a capacity where he is more in the field, than leading and directing. And this different role fits him just fine.

### Retired, and Then to Write a Book

My friend Paul, who I met on Star Island 15 years ago, made a similar transition. He took early retirement, but kept a role in his research lab about 5 miles from his home. A physicist and son of a Methodist minister, he won several Templeton Foundation grants to teach courses in science and religion dialog. After 3 years of part-time teaching, he began writing a book on the spirituality of art. The book was published about 3 years ago.

### Always More to Be Done

Elijah also struggles with an issue of ministry that may also be true in other fields of work. This is the problem of letting go. While he goes up on the mountain, not sure of what to do next, God tells him to go back and anoint a successor. But he keeps thinking there is more prophet work to do. And no doubt there is more yet to do. In ministry, as a pastor is guiding the people, his or her hopes for the congregation are often somewhere out in front of the present state of the congregation. He may have hopes for the congregation which cannot be realized for several years. Yet, even when that pastor discerns a different calling, he leaves knowing there is more to be done.

This very issue came up in my Interim Support Group this past week. One of my interim colleagues had set an end point in her ministry for a variety of personal reasons. However, she admitted to being frustrated that she had plans for the church that there would not be time for her to put into action. Some of us told her that yes, there will always be more that can be done. Those can be tasks for the congregation and the next pastor.

### Relate to Interim Work

I know this is especially true in interim ministry. Since an interim ministry is relatively short, compared to settled pastorates, I often see my role as planting seeds, that will later be nurtured by the settled pastor.

For, as we see the needs of God's people in the days to come, there is always more to be

done.

### Conclusion

It is trite but true that changing roles is a part of life. We evolve from teen agers to young adults from parents to grandparents. We grow and mature, and discover new experiences, yet in the midst of all; these life changes, we may nurture many of the same gifts and hold fast to common hopes and dreams. Just, as John Calvin had a dream of changing the church, he held fast to those dreams whether he was pasturing in Geneva or Strasbourg, and continued to revise his great work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Our calling may be nurturing children, and we do that first as parents, then as grandparents, and maybe as Sunday School teachers. I know of a writer whose calling is writing, but throughout his career, the topics he writes about have ranged from history to cooking.

When we enter times of change, and reckon with God's time frames, it is a good thing to consider the story of Elijah once again. For Elijah found the key to the next stage in his life when on retreat on Mt. Horeb. There he listened very carefully to the "still small voice" of God. I commend to us all the practice of listening for that still small voice. Amen!