

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
June 27, 2010  
2 Kings 2: 1-2; 6-14  
Peace with Justice Sunday/Graduate Recognition Sunday

As I read this astounding story from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings this week – this story about Elijah and Elisha, I thought about a number of things. And then I did some more thinking about those things I thought. There was, you might say, a whirlwind of activity within my mind, and out of that whirlwind comes this message. It's a message for the graduates who are here today. It's a message for all the peace with justice advocates who are here today. It's a message for anyone who cares about living out their faith in the world. It's a message, therefore, for all of us who are here today.

Elisha, the younger prophet, has spent time following and learning from Elijah, the older prophet. And now it's time for Elijah to depart. It's a dramatic scene. The chariots. The fire. The whirlwind. Pretty exciting. But hard for Elisha. He hasn't wanted to leave Elijah's side. And he cries out when Elijah is taken up. He tears his own clothes into pieces. But then he picks up the mantle Elijah has left behind, and he uses it just as Elijah had used it – he strikes the water with it, the waters part, and Elisha crosses the river.

It's a story of leadership succession. It's a story of inheritance. It's a story of God continuing to give power to those whom God has called.

The mantle, the outer robe, is not powerful in and of itself. It's not like Harry Potter's magic cloak, the one he can put on to make himself invisible to others. The mantle isn't magic. The mantle is a symbol of power. It represents Elijah's and then Elisha's prophetic power. A power that comes, of course, from God. Because Elijah and Elisha did not apply for admission into the Hebrew School of Prophecy. They didn't stand in line at the Prophets R Us Employment agency. They were called by God. They were chosen by God to re-present and to represent God's message for God's people. To speak God's word. To carry out God's purposes.

They don't have books in the Bible named for them. But their prophetic witness and actions have not been forgotten. The biblical books may be called 1 and 2 Kings, but they are as much about Elijah and Elisha as anyone else. For it's the prophets who hold the kings accountable, and who cast judgment on them when they fail, which they do, in these biblical accounts, over and over again. It's the prophets who challenge the kings and who keep calling the Israel, God's people, to faithfulness.

A seminary professor offers this interpretation:

“In the Hebrew Bible, Pharaoh does not meet his end in the book of Exodus, but he later haunts Israel in the form of its own kings who, enticed and blinded by political power, forget that the God under whose authority they serve not only despises tyrants, but is also inclined to intervene against them if they lead the people to apostasy or oppress the most vulnerable among them...Israel's main challenge is remaining faithful to Yahweh in a world in which Pharaoh appears to have all the power. Israel's continual temptation is to buy into Pharaoh's view of reality and operate, as the pragmatists advise, as if immanent power were everything, and transcendent power nothing”

(Trevor Eppehimer, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, pp. 175-176).

It isn't a mantle of magic or riches or royalty that Elisha assumes. It's the mantle of prophetic responsibility. It's the mantle of faithfulness to God. And what I want to tell you graduates on this special day is that it is also the mantle of peace and justice.

You are not inheriting a legacy of peace, of course. Quite the contrary. From the little bit of research I did on this, there are, it seems, around 40 or so countries right now involved in a war or conflict. And neither is justice readily evident. The gap between the rich and poor has increased. Basic human and civil rights are still being violated. Children are exploited. You know the litany. We all know the litany. The prophetic responsibility, however, has not changed. It's still up to those who love God to challenge the powers that be in the world when the ways of God are violated. It's still our responsibility as people of faith to be makers of peace and doers of justice.

Near the end of his 2007 keynote address at the United Church of Christ's General Synod, Bill Moyers shared his experience of arriving early to worship at New York's Riverside Church, a Baptist/UCC church he and his wife attend. He picked up a pew Bible and it randomly opened to the Gospel of Matthew, so he began reading it—and he shared how it struck him that the story changed when Jesus entered the Temple and drove out the moneychangers. He then spoke these words:

“And sitting in the pew that morning, I thought of what I've been saying to you today, how in the past generation as the number of the poor has increases, wages fell, health and housing costs exploded, and wealth and media became more and more concentrated, prophetic religion lost its voice and the religious right drowned out everyone else, and they hijacked Jesus. The very Jesus who stood in his hometown and proclaimed, ‘The Lord has anointed me to preach the Good News to the poor’. The very Jesus who told 5000 hungry people that all, that not just the people in the box sets, would be fed. The very Jesus who challenged the religious orthodoxy of the day by feeding the hungry on the Sabbath, who offered kindness to the prostitute and hospitality to the outcast, who said, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to little children’, who raised the status of women, and treated even the hated tax collector like a citizen of the Kingdom. The indignant Jesus who drove the money changers from the temple has been hijacked, and turned from the friend of the dispossessed into a guardian of privilege, a militarist, a hedonist, a lobbyist...sent prowling the halls of Congress in Gucci's seeking tax breaks and loopholes for the powerful, costly new weapons systems and punitive public policies for people without political power”. He concludes with this plea: “My friends, they say your church is dying. They say your church is lame, and limp, and liberal. And they're coming after you...But you know, they don't take on people they're not afraid of. And it is a small committed, determined People of Conscience who can turn this country around! Please, please, listen. This new struggle for a just world – it's not a partisan affair. God is not a liberal or conservative. God is not a Democrat or Republican. She may be a Baptist, I don't know. But to see whose side God is on, just go to the record. It's the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the poor who are blessed in the eyes of God. It is kindness and mercy that prove the power of faith, and it's justice that measures the worth of the state, not empire. Kings are held accountable for how the poor fare under their reign. Presidents, too. Prophets speak to the gap between rich and poor as a reason for God's judgment. Poverty and justice are religious issues, and

Jesus moves among the disinherited... This is the Jesus who drove the money changers out of the temple of Jerusalem. Let's call that Jesus back to duty, and drive the money

changers out of the temple of democracy. If you don't, who will?" (Bill Moyers address, June 23, 2007, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)).

His words are just as relevant, I think, to us here in this church, on this day. His challenge is also just as relevant: "If you don't, who will?"

If Elisha hadn't picked up Elijah's mantle, what would have happened in the rest of the story of God's people? And if we don't assume the mantle of responsibility in our time, who will?

You graduates have all been raised in this church. You have examples of faithfulness all around you. You have been in the presence of persons who care about doing the right thing – who have worked hard here in Cleveland Heights for fair housing, who have sponsored political refugees, protested discrimination, stood up for the rights of gays and lesbians in society and in the church, who have built homes for Habitat for Humanity, and volunteered countless hours at the Food Bank, and joined Interact Cleveland's causes of justice, and advocated for and educated about peace in the middle east – and so on. These are your Elijahs: Nurses, doctors, teachers, researchers, lawyers, sales managers, child care providers, social workers, computer programmers, insurance and banking professionals, public safety and city workers, pastors, engineers, office administrators, factory workers, counselors, artists, musicians, carpenters, maintenance workers, moms and dads, people who care about what they do, people who care about the doing the right thing, people who care about living out their faith.

When Elisha asked Elijah for a double share of Elijah's spirit, he didn't mean that needed twice as much spirit power as Elijah to do his work. What he meant is that he wanted to be regarded as a first born son, who in that time, always received a double portion of the father's inheritance. In effect was asking to be regarded as Elijah's son, as Elijah's rightful heir. But it isn't until the end of our reading for today that we know for sure that Elisha has received what he asked for. It's not picking up the mantle that matters most. It's using it. Hear again these verses:

"He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over".

Inheriting a legacy is one thing. Building on that legacy is another.

Collecting money for peace with justice offering is one thing. Getting involved in a ministry of peace with justice is another.

Coming to church is one thing. Doing the work of the church in the world is another.

Saying you're a Christian is one thing. Living out your Christian faith is another.

The challenge for all of us – graduates embarking on a new stage of life, as well as those of us younger and older than these graduates – is to live out our faithfulness to God with honesty and creativity and responsibility. It's finding those places in our lives

where can make a difference – and then doing what it takes. It's speaking up for those whose voices have been silenced by the powers that be. It's trusting God to give us what we need to do the work God calls us to do.

How that got fleshed out was different for Elisha than it was for Elijah. How Elijah fleshed it out was different than it was for Moses. How Jesus fleshed it out was different that it was for John the Baptist. How Paul fleshed it out was different that it was for Peter. How we flesh it out – how we make the gospel real in our day and time is and was different than it was for those who have gone before us, too. Jason, T.J, Selby, Chalon, Rebekah, David, Brittany – you have crossed your own kind of river – from one state of life to another. It's exciting. It's scary. You've learned much from those who have raised and taught and mentored you – but you don't have all the answers yet. There is still much to learn and experience. But don't be so afraid of what you don't know, or so cynical about how messed up things are in the world, that you don't just go ahead and use the mantle of responsibility God has entrusted with you. You have as much right to use it as the rest of us. Elisha didn't know if the water would part for him like they did for Elijah or not. But how would he ever know if he didn't take the mantle in his hands and strike the water with it?

Will everything you try in your lives work out the way you want?  
 Will the world be more at peace when your children graduate than it is now?  
 Will the gap between the rich and the poor close?  
 Will the world's children laugh and dance and sing?  
 Will there really be liberty and justice for all?

I don't know. We don't know. But how will we ever know if you – and the rest of us too, don't do the things needed to be done? Because, if we don't, who will?

I'll close with this prayer from the Jewish tradition. It's called the Hashkiveynu, and is used at the end of the Sabbath evening service, as well as in the home before bedtime. I pray this prayer for our sons and daughters today – for David and Rebekah and Jason and Chalon and Selby and Brittany and T.J. May they indeed receive a double share of our spirit, and in that sense take on the tasks of today's Elishas. I pray this prayer for all of us here today who continue to be involved in the ministries of peace with justice.

I pray this prayer for our beleaguered world, so in need of God's peace, so in need of God's sheltering love.

“Cause us to lie down, God, our God, in peace, and awaken us to life again, our Sovereign. Spread over us your mantle of peace, guide us with your good counsel. Save us because of your mercy. Shield us from enemy and pestilence, starvation, sword and sorrow....You, O God, guard and deliver us. You are gracious and merciful God. Guard our coming and our going, grant us life and peace, now and always. Spread over us the mantle of your peace.” Amen.