

Taking Up the Mantle

1 Kings 19: 19-21 Luke 10: 1-11

After many years involved with community groups, I've noticed the rarity of people who are willing to do leadership. It isn't that people aren't capable, rather they know, possibly from first-hand experience or at least from close observation, that leadership is demanding, often butting heads with people, and dealing with people who are buttheads. It can be extremely rewarding and it can be extremely devastating at the same time.

After getting tossed from my first church in New Jersey, I worked for a year in commercial collections for a regional restaurant supply distributor.

Then I applied to be the Executive Director of the Fair Housing Council of Delaware County, Pennsylvania. The organization had been around since 1956 and they had been advocates for fair housing in communities in this Philadelphia suburb which had routinely kept out black residents. Apart from periodic small grants that enabled fair housing testing efforts, they had been all-volunteer. In 1990, it was now a tiny group of old ladies who struggled to remain active, but they had landed a \$70,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to handle enforcement efforts for the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 which President Reagan had signed into law. It turned out that no other organization in greater Philadelphia had applied for a grant, and Fair Housing Council of Delaware County got it simply by completing the application.

They were very proud and very excited by this large grant that would enable them to do far more than they had ever done before. The grant called for conducting 100 fair housing tests in a year – a typical year for them would have been less than 10 tests – and all of these tests would be carried out in *three* suburban counties, Delaware, Chester, and Montgomery counties, not just Delaware County.

A test for racial discrimination would mean sending out a white tester to a location followed by a black tester. Their experiences would be documented and compared. If there was evidence of different treatment, another white tester would be sent out to see what their experience was like. If the test proved discrimination, the organization would file a complaint against the housing provider with HUD or the appropriate authority. It was obvious that a bunch of little old ladies was not going to pull off anything of this scope.

At my interview, I made a point of saying that their organization – and I emphasized *their organization* – would cease to exist. The organization that they known and grown and loved sharing together for over 30 years would become lost to them if I **succeeded** in fulfilling the terms of this grant. They assured me excitedly that that was *exactly* what they wanted to have happen. I shared my doubts, but as long as they were advised beforehand and realized what was coming, I took the job.

There were plenty of tense moments in the first year, and those became magnified in the second year as the Board of old ladies was determined to maintain their authority, even to the detriment of the organization's development. As the second year was closing, it was clear they were going to fire me, but I accepted a call to be an Associate Pastor in Fairfax, Virginia within days of being fired. I had seen the handwriting on the wall.

Passing the mantle of leadership from one to another is a critical juncture in any organization. In the Presbyterian Church USA, we have developed a whole class of ministers who are known as interim pastors. They provide transition between one permanent pastor to the next permanent pastor. Experience had shown that changes were best managed by an effective interim who could clear the slate for the next one coming along. Without any interim, the new pastor coming in usually turned out to have a short stay because the church wasn't prepared for the change.

For the Fair Housing Council, after I left, the Board completely changed and the organization thrived. In 2014, they changed the name to Housing Equality Center of Pennsylvania which now covers 6 counties as well as the city of Philadelphia. It remains the oldest Fair Housing Council in the nation.

When leadership changes, the mantle needs to be taken up if the enterprise is going to succeed. When Jesus departs and the Holy Spirit comes, it is time for a new generation to take up the mantle, and the line of that succession continues today in every Christian community. By looking at Elijah embracing his successor, Elisha, and Jesus empowering his disciples to do what **he** had been doing, we can see how the leadership mantle gets taken up.

Part of God's instruction to Elijah when they encountered one another on the mountaintop – besides telling Elijah to go back the way he came – was to select and begin grooming his successor, Elisha.

After finishing his task, Elijah goes forth and finds him. What is Elisha doing? He's plowing a field. (Here are one of several allusions between Elijah's story and Jesus' story in Luke.) Elisha is plowing the field with 12 yoke of oxen. That's a lot of oxen. A farmer would consider himself blessed to have one ox for plowing. **Twelve** oxen indicate the wealth that Elisha possesses. Of course, 12 representing the symbolic number of the tribes of Israel – God's people – makes sense, too, indicating the scope of Elisha's sacred calling.

What follows is a strange sequence, starting with Elijah simply draping the mantle onto Elisha's shoulders and walking away. There is no anointing mentioned that would indicate the fulfillment of the calling. Instead, we see how Elisha has to run to catch up to Elijah and asks the prophet to allow him time to say farewell to his mother and father. Elijah says, *Go ahead*. But then he says something no one really understands, *What have I done to you?* or *Have I done anything to you?* There is no reply by Elisha so commentators feel the prophet is saying in an odd way, 'What have I done to prevent you (from saying good-bye to your parents)?' Or is Elijah saying

perhaps, ‘Do you know what I have *done* to you?’ as in ‘Do you know what you’re getting into?’

The lack of verbal reply may be irrelevant when we hear what Elisha does. He slaughters the oxen – all 12 presumably – uses the plow for firewood, and has a huge barbecue. He gives away the food and *then* he follows Elijah. In a bold, definitive statement, Elisha has acted without words to commit himself to the mission ahead. He has reduced his known life to ashes in order to fully accept the mantle that Elijah has conferred upon him.

As stark as Elisha’s actions may seem, we find Jesus teaching his disciples as they get some field testing experience related in Luke 10.

Having *set his face toward Jerusalem*, Jesus is moving forward with his disciples. Moving through Samaria, Jesus decides to send seventy of his disciples ahead of him. Seventy? Yes, seventy. In Matthew, the parallel account has Jesus sending the Twelve on a mission. In Luke, the Seventy refers back to Moses. You’ll recall that Moses’ work got to be too much and he brings 70 elders to the mountain where they prophesy in the Spirit. (You’ll remember that it was supposed to be 72 who received the Spirit-gift, but there were two didn’t make it to the meeting, but they got the Spirit-gift anyway, much to Joshua’s concern. ‘They didn’t come to the meeting; they shouldn’t get the Spirit-gift, right?’) Scholars are pretty certain that Luke is continuing to draw from the images of the lives of both Moses and Elijah, the two figures who joined Jesus at the Transfiguration.

Jesus sends the Seventy out in pairs apparently, even though the Greek text has literally “two-by-two.” They’re sent ahead of Jesus, still in Samaria, not friendly territory for Jews or for Jesus. In this hostile environment, they’re given the warning that they’re like lambs among wolves. They receive a specific set of instructions.

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. The ‘no greeting on the road’ instruction is a caution due to being on unfriendly turf. No purse that might contain money is to be taken along. No bag that might carry clothes or provisions is to be brought. Even sandals are excluded for the Seventy. They’re to appear at a place in their garment only, bearing their good news of the coming Kingdom and the good news of new life in Jesus. That’s their primary mission. This isn’t about them, going from house to house like beggars and seeing who will receive them, provide them with hospitality, and how much they might get for themselves. Jesus tells them: *Eat what is set before you; heal the sick who are there, and tell them, “The kingdom of God is near you.”*

If welcomed, they’re to share the good news of new life in the Kingdom. If not, if their witness to the Kingdom is met with hostility, then they simply depart.

The sending of the disciples in mission is an in-the-field training for them. Jesus likely has in mind two things. First, the advancement of the Kingdom will be enhanced by empowering the disciples to do what he has been doing alone. Whether it is Twelve or

Seventy being trained in advancing the Kingdom, it can proceed with much greater strength and depth when the disciples are empowered as servants of the Kingdom, too.

Secondly, he knows from experience and history that people like him, like the imprisoned and executed John the Baptist, don't have great odds at surviving. If Jesus himself gets taken out of the picture, there will be others who can take up the mantle and advance the Kingdom without him. Ultimately, this is the evangelical mission of Jesus, the good news mission, to advance the kingdom by drawing in new disciples, new Kingdom servants who will share in the ministry with still others. This is the mission that comes to us – to advance the Kingdom as Kingdom servants who continually bring new disciples into service for the Kingdom.

How did they do? They reported, *“Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”* Jesus replied, *“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”* (Lk 10: 17-20)

The language about Satan, snakes, and scorpions all symbolically refer to the worldly powers being overcome by the faithful servants of the Kingdom. It shouldn't be taken literally as some extremist Christian groups have done; I mean you snake-handlers. Those faithful to the mission of the Kingdom and Jesus' way of life in the Kingdom are empowered to bring into submission those worldly powers that have chosen to act contrary to God's will, having abandoned or abused their mandate to serve God's people.

Receiving the Spirit at Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to be with us in our servanthood for the Kingdom. At Pentecost, the mantle of advancing the Kingdom in Jesus' name and in Jesus' way came to us.

Wherever we are on life's journey, the Spirit is our empowerment to be witnesses and servants of the Kingdom of God. The mantle of Jesus' leadership is upon our shoulders now. We are the ones who need to do the miraculous work of the Kingdom today, healing the broken, casting out evil, and bringing new life to those who have lost their lives along the way. We're called to follow in the footsteps of those many disciples who have gone before us, taking up the mantle in faithful dedication to the Lord and his Kingdom.