

“Picking Up the Mantle”

Mark 9:2-9
2 Kings 2:1-14

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Growing up is a process of learning to become responsible. As children our parents begin to teach us responsibility at a very young age. We learn how to keep our rooms clean, to take our dishes to the kitchen, dress ourselves. Little by little we become more and more responsible. However there is a limit to what can be taught to us by our parents. There comes a point when we continue the process of growing up by the absence of our parents.

It is only when we are left alone to make our own decisions that we begin to truly exercise adult responsibility. I remember my first night in my first apartment away from my parents. I worked hard to make the place as clean and neat as I could. I assure I never once had such an impulse living at home with mom and dad. But this was my place, my responsibility. I felt so independent. But perhaps I was still resting on the knowledge that I could just pick up the phone and call my parents. Surely they would come to my rescue. And they did so many times.

One of the things I hear from folks whose parents have left this earthly realm, is that they didn't realize how much they relied on their parents until they could not just pick up the phone and ask for help. They replaced their advice seeking with what would dad do, what would mom do. This is often the point where we truly pick up the mantle our parents drop upon death.

It may mean that we take over a family business. It may mean that we become the head of the family. It may also mean that we take on some of the personality traits of our parents. My paternal grandfather had a great wink that went with a great sense of humor. He could make these wonderfully funny comments, while winking at you. It meant you were included in his world. It always made you feel so good. Shortly after poppa passed, I witnessed that my dad had inherited the wink. I had never seen my dad do it before. He picked up the mantle.

The origin of this phrase comes from our story from 2 Kings. We first meet Elisha in 1 Kings when Elijah sees the young man plowing in the field. He walks up to him and throws his mantle, his outer cloak, over him. And in this way he included Elisha in his world and made him his disciple. Elisha followed his master everywhere. He learned from him and loved him like a father. He witnessed Elijah do amazing things. He saw him call fire down from heaven. He heard him denounce kings at the peril of his own life. Things he could not even imagine doing on his own.

But the day finally came for Elijah to leave him. This was the day he dreaded most of all. His master asked him what last thing he could do for him before he left. Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” I think maybe Elisha felt like he would need double his spirit to take over the responsibility that Elijah would

be leaving him.

Have you ever known someone who seems to do so much at such a high level that it would take many people to replace what he or she did? Earl Hutchison is a person I think of in that way. I could use double his spirit.

Elijah though says that to receive double his spirit Elisha must witness his leaving. He must see for himself that he is truly gone. Otherwise, he might spend his time and energy searching for him rather than picking up the mantle that he leaves for him.

He witnesses this amazing event. He picks up the mantle. He parts the waters with it just like his master did. He begins to lead. He takes on both the responsibility of Elijah but also begins to lead with that same spirit.

Perhaps Elisha did not realize that that spirit was not Elijah's, but it was the Holy Spirit that God had sent to Elijah. He sent that same spirit to Elisha. And he received it when he put on the mantle. He said yes to the responsibility that God was laying upon him. An awesome responsibility that requires the work of the Spirit to perform.

The story points us forward to perhaps a more familiar story to us today. Jesus has died and then by the Holy Spirit raised back to life. He appears to the disciples right before he is taken up into heaven, not unlike Elijah. He promises that soon after he is gone, they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Jesus is laying his mantle upon them.

Imagine what a heavy burden this seems to be. The salvation of the world laid squarely on their shoulders. They are just fishermen. Jesus is the one who does all the real work they only follow. In other words, as long as Jesus was around they did not have to grow up and take full responsibility. Had Jesus never left, the disciples never would have become the great people of faith that they became. They would have just looked to Jesus.

But he leaves them with a great promise; the Holy Spirit will come and give them the power to carry this awesome mantle. Remember Jesus' words, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Jesus' mantle seems way too big, but with the Spirit what seem impossibly heavy is easy and light. Rather than wearing us out, it gives rest for our souls.

Picking up Jesus' mantle always means receiving his Spirit, it means that we are included in his world, an everlasting world. It makes us like Jesus. Like Elisha took on some of Elijah's characteristics. Like my dad took on his dad's loving wink. We begin to resemble Jesus in the world. We begin to love like he loved and forgive like he forgave. We stand up for the oppressed and downtrodden. We bind the wounds of a weary and wounded world. We bring people and God together.

It's a huge responsibility to be Jesus...but if we pick up the mantle, we are promised his Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. This makes the burden light and easy. It makes what seem impossible doable, if we are willing to pick up the mantle.

If God came to you and said, "I want you to build 300,000 houses." I suppose most of us would be too intimidated to pick up this mantle. However, Millard and Linda Fuller did. They came up with an idea of bringing people with money together with people who do not have money to have a house, they called it partnership housing. Both volunteers and families who were willing to work for their house come together. And 30 years later they have built over 300,000 houses worldwide. Today we know this international project as Habitat for Humanity. This idea was inspired by the Spirit, and fueled by the Spirit. It has brought millions of people together to share a mantle that would be impossible for anyone person.

About 20 years ago the pastor of a small congregation in Pennsylvania had an accident and he didn't have any health insurance. The congregation decided to pick up the mantle and help this man's family. They pulled their resources and paid his bill. They decided that they would create a common fund dedicated to helping with medical bills of anyone in the congregation. Their community now numbers over 20,000. They call themselves The Simple Way and they have paid over \$400,000,000 in medical bills. An impossible burden made light by the power of the Holy Spirit bringing people together around concern for paying medical bills.

We look at people like this in the same way the disciples looked at Jesus or Elisha looked at Elijah and say, "But we could never do anything like that." But all they did was pick up the mantle. The Spirit brought the power to make it happen.

This church is at a crucial time in its 27-year history. We are facing a significant financial challenge and at the same time we are called to do God's work in our community. Both of these mantles seem difficult on their own, but accomplishing both may seem impossible. We can't pay our bills and help others at the same time, we may say. But we must not forget that when we pick up the mantle, Christ promises the Spirit to send us the power to accomplish anything that is in God's will. We can raise the funds we need to continue doing ministry here at Priest Lake. We can do so much more than we ever imagine, we can do what only God can imagine and that's inconceivable! I want to lay down a mantle for each of us. For period of Lent which begins this next week and ends on Easter Sunday, give 10% of your income to the common cause of this church, not ear-marked for any purpose or project other than the for the fulfillment of the mantle that God has laid upon this church.

Trust that the Spirit will be given to you. We can feed hungry neighbors, and trust that God will feed us too. Who knows where these things will lead. Who knows that some preacher 20 years from now may be telling how a small church in Tennessee who could barely pay their bills picked up the mantle of feeding hungry families and it led to feeding the world. Pick up the mantle. Christ left this earth so that his followers would

be included in his work, his mantle. And when we pick it up and take on the responsibility of salvation for the world, we find that we have been included in the everlasting world of God. Pick up the mantle, the mantle of life.