

“Transitions From One Generation to the Next”

Based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10

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Annual Conference is something I look forward to every year. It's like a family reunion, with some great music and inspired preaching thrown in. If you have ever been to Lakeside, Ohio, you know that's a beautiful setting and a relaxed atmosphere. You just have to sometimes tolerate sticky heat and the annual plague of May flies. There are some aspects of Annual Conference that are difficult, like the sometimes acrimonious debate. But for the most part, Annual Conference is one of the events I look forward to every year.

One of the highlights for many of us is the ordination service. Every person who is ordained that night process in with a unique banner, often created by people from their home church or others who are special to their lives. It is a service that is full of pomp and circumstance.

But those who are to be commissioned or ordained are not the only ones who process in. Those who will be retiring also process. At the beginning of the service each pastor that is retiring gets to walk across the stage and shake the bishop's hand. But the best part is at the end of the service. Different items are handed over from a retired pastor to a newly ordained pastor: a Bible, the Book of Discipline, a bowl and towel, a chalice. It is like a passing of the mantle from one generation to the next. It is a powerful display of hope that the church outlasts all of us, that God is always calling people to ministry so that when those of us who have been at this for forty years, or who get too old, reach the time where we have to lay our ministry down, others are there to pick it up and run with it until their time comes. And the transition of ordained ministry from generation to generation continues.

Now this transition of ordained ministry from one generation to the next is not the only one. The truth is that *all* of us have to manage going through transitions from one generation to the next, no matter what your career is. Some of you know this first hand. Approaching the age of 50 I'm only starting to contemplate this, but at some point we all will have to make room for a younger generation to take their place of

responsibility. We can't hold the reins forever. At some point, we have to move over or even let go so that others can take the place of responsibility and continue the work that is bigger than all of us. Passing through that transition is difficult, and messy, and sometimes scary. It can even be a cause for grief, or a little remorse. It takes work and a good deal of grace to navigate through this kind of transition.

This is what is happening with Eli and Samuel who we heard about this morning. Eli was at a difficult time in his life. He was the chief priest and well advanced in age, to the point where his vision was starting to go. It was time for him to step back and let his sons do more of the priestly work. The problem was that his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, were scoundrels. They were not worthy to follow their father and be in charge of the priestly work. See, in those days, the priests were part of a hereditary line. You weren't called into the priesthood by God. So, with having these two rotten sons, not only was Eli in a bind, but the whole people were in trouble. God had to act.

And so, God did. God called Samuel to be a faithful priest. In 1 Sam. 2:35 we find, "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind." God fulfills this statement by calling Samuel to be that faithful priest, even though he is young, perhaps 12 years of age.

So what does Eli do? What could he have done? After Samuel came to Eli three times thinking that the voice he was hearing was Eli's, it dawns on Eli that God is calling his name. Now, Eli could have said to Samuel, "Ignore it. If I need you I will come and wake you up. Somebody's probably pranking you." Or, Eli could have said, "OK, if you hear somebody calling you again, come get me and I'll talk to him. Don't do anything or talk to him, come get me and I'll take care of it." But Eli did not choose those options. With wisdom and, I might add, some humility, he instructed Samuel what to do. Eli realized that God was calling out, not to him, but to Samuel. If he thought about it, Eli might have realized, "It's happening. God is making the move, pushing my failed family aside so that the people will have a faithful priest." Without being defensive, without trying to take charge of the situation, Eli taught Samuel how to respond so that God's will could be

accomplished. His sons were a mess, but Eli showed incredible character. It had to have hurt him, but he did what needed to be done, without laying his baggage on Samuel or seeking to hold on to power. Eli did what was necessary so that God's intentions could be fulfilled and that the necessary transition of responsibility could happen.

Now there is a very important point I want to make here. The transition of responsibility from one generation to the next *does not mean* that older people are to be sent to pasture and the younger people are just to take over. That is not the case at all. For example, Samuel didn't even know God was talking to him. He needed Eli to teach him how to hear and respond to God's voice. Eli had an important role as teacher. Once Samuel got the call to take up this responsibility, there would be a need for guidance, a mentoring relationship. So Eli had to be a mentor for Samuel as he steps in to this responsibility. So just because God had called Samuel did not mean that Eli had nothing to do or no responsibilities. What it meant was that Eli's responsibility had *changed*. He was still critical to Samuel's successful transition into the work of a priest.

So all this is true for us as we navigate through times of transition. Our responsibilities change. We don't lose responsibility, we get different ones. Parenthood is a great example of the transitioning from certain responsibilities to others. The responsibilities you have for your children are very different when they are two years old and when they are twenty-two. And the responsibility children have toward their parents change, when their parents are fifty and when their parents are ninety. When transitions of leadership happen, responsibility doesn't go away, it just changes. Those who have laid the burden down or passed it on to a younger generation still have the responsibility to be engaged as mentors, teachers, companions, even cheerleaders.

When those retired pastors hand those religious symbols over to newly ordained pastors on the stage in Hoover Auditorium, it is a time of celebration. It is a demonstration of hope that the work of the Church known as United Methodist continues. It is a thing to celebrate when younger people sense the call to rise up and do their part. It is worth celebrating but also worth remembering that when a new group of

people rise up to take the responsibility to lead, things are going to be different. Still talking about ministry, our society is much different from what it was like even in the 1990s when I started out. The young people who will be ordained in a few days have grown up in a society that has changed, a society that they are a product of, a society they understand and connect with better than anyone over 40. As a result, the ways ministry is done will change because our context has changed. But those who were raised in this new context will be able to figure out how to do ministry in it. They don't have all the answers! And older pastors do have some wisdom, lessons learned, and spiritual depth that younger people need as they navigate into their ministries and discover the answers.

Samuel's ministry was different from Eli's. Eli stayed in the Temple and did priestly things. Samuel is going to hit the road. He is more of a prophet than a priest. He will end up anointing two kings, Saul and then later David. Samuel becomes the one through whom God allows Israel to have what they wanted, which was a monarchy. So Samuel's ministry was different from Eli's. But the context changed so different ministry was required. And God was behind it all.

And that's one final point I want to make: this transition of leadership from Eli to Samuel didn't happen until God acted by calling Samuel's name. This was no one's idea but God's. The lesson here is that transitions that God intends occur when God determines to open up that possibility by calling people by name. But even then, Samuel needed help to discern that it was God calling him. And he needed someone who was willing to not get in the way of what God had in mind, even though it would be a source of loss and grief, because for Eli, what mattered most was not his own desires and position but what God wanted to happen. If God had not spoken, then nothing would have changed. When God did speak, Eli was ready to yield so that God could direct the action.

So, until you hear something different, keep doing the work placed in your hand. Whatever your responsibilities are, keep being faithful and don't give up. Even if you are tired. Even if you are discouraged. Even if

you wished someone would come along to pick up the slack or take this off your plate. If in your heart of hearts you still sense that responsibility, that God has not removed that responsibility from you, keep at it. Keep relying on God who renews our strength, whose grace is sufficient to carry us through. Just be ready to make room and even relinquish if God ever makes the move and calls another to take up the work. And be grateful that God sees to it that there is always another being prepared until the time of transition comes, the hand off takes place, and God's will continues to be accomplished.