

“Sharing the Power”

Based on 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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The passage from 2 Kings that we heard this morning would have been a great one if I was preaching my last sermon to you all. It is the story of how Elijah transferred power and authority to Elisha so that he could carry on the work of God after Elijah gets swept up to heaven. Of course, I wouldn't have suggested that I am Elijah and the pastor following me is Elisha. That would definitely be presumptuous. But when one pastor leaves and another comes there is a transfer of power and authority. Pastors come in to a congregation with some power and authority linked to being the pastor. And hopefully as relationships are established and trust is built the pastor gains power and authority always for the purpose of fulfilling the responsibilities of leading the church in ministry.

But we aren't going through that now. I am grateful that we still have a month together. So we don't have to be talking about pastoral transitions now. Instead, I invite us to reflect on the transfer of power from one to another, just in general. Transitions happen all the time and not just in churches. Maybe you are getting a new boss. Every fall, kids get new teachers when they advance in their grade level. In situations like this you have to adjust to a new person. Or you are the one who is transitioning. You are the new boss. Or you are transitioning into retirement. Or your relationship with your kids change when they move out of the house or leave for college. In all of these transitions there is a change in power and authority. Either your own power and authority is shifting or you are having to adjust to the power and authority of another. How do we navigate these transitions?

Well, that's a big question that can't be covered in a sermon. I want to focus on our power and authority as Christians. Believe it or not, because you are a disciple of Jesus Christ you possess power and authority. It's not the same power and authority as a boss, a teacher or a parent. But you do possess power and authority. I want to talk about this

in two ways: first, that when you were baptized you received spiritual power and the authority that comes with it. You have the authority of your own experience of God in your life as one of God's children. And you possess the power of the Holy Spirit. We are going to reflect on that. Second, we are going to reflect on the importance of empowering others for ministry. You and I have been empowered and authorized to represent Jesus in the world. How might we share that power with others, who may or may not be Christians but who are committed to the work of shaping the world into the beloved community that God longs to see? We are going to think about that too.

Elijah knew his time had come to leave this earth and be whisked up to heaven. So he is making his way to his departure area with Elisha tagging along. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind and three times Elisha says he is staying by Elijah's side. Why was Elijah trying to shake Elisha off? Was this a test to see how faithful Elisha will be? Did Elijah just want to be left alone as he makes this final trip? We don't know. We do know that Elisha was not going to let Elijah leave this world alone. He wanted to be by his side all the way to the end.

So finally, when it became clear to Elijah that Elisha wasn't going to leave his side, he asks Elisha what he wants before the fiery chariot swings low to lift Elijah up to heaven. Elisha makes the bold request to receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Elijah responds by saying, "That's a tall order." Elijah's spirit is the energy, the divine power given to him by God to do the work of a prophet. In those days, only prophets received the Holy Spirit. Elisha wanted that same spirit, but a double portion. That's bold. The power and authority Elijah already had was impressive. Like we talked about last week, he faced down those prophets of Baal. He raised a boy from the dead. He did all kinds of miracles and wielded all kinds of authority as a spokesperson for God. The power God had given him made Elijah larger than life. And Elisha wanted a double helping. I would like to know why Elisha made such a claim. Maybe he was referencing the practice in those days where the first-born son received a double share of any inheritance the father leaves behind to his children when he dies. So maybe in asking for the double portion Elisha is claiming himself as the first-born spiritual son

of Elijah. Whether it was for this reason or for others, Elisha knew that if he was going to be able to continue the work that Elijah did, he was going to need Elijah's spirit, which is really the Holy Spirit, in order to do the work. He needed spiritual power to be a prophet.

Now, when you and I were baptized we also received the Holy Spirit. When I baptize someone I pray for the Holy Spirit to fill the person so that they may become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. We need the Holy Spirit so that we can live a Christian life. To be a follower of Jesus is not something we can do by our own power. We live in a society that in so many ways makes it very challenging to live the way of Jesus. And our own tendency to sin corrupts us and muddies up our motives. We need God's Spirit to strengthen us, give us clarity, wisdom, courage, and soften our hearts so that we can live our daily lives guided by the way of Jesus.

This is an example of God's grace. For Elisha, he had to ask for the spirit to come on him so that he would have the power and authority to be a prophet. For you and me, we don't have to ask. We receive it as a part of our experience of baptism, whether we are baptized when we are babies or later in life makes no difference. As Peter said when he gave his first sermon in Acts, the time has come when God pours the Spirit on all people. As those who have been baptized, we receive the Spirit. We don't have to ask for it like Elisha had to. God sees to it that all of us have the power and authority we need to live a Christian life.

A lot of churches will list in their bulletins the names of the pastors and staff. And somewhere on that list the bulletin will have the position of "Minister" listed. And next to that title you will read "the congregation." It is a reminder that every one of us, ordained or not, have all the power and authority we need to be ministers in the world. You all know this. It's not my job alone to do the ministry of this church. If it was my job alone...oh boy. Not good. Each of you have your own networks of relationships where you can demonstrate the gospel. You can influence so many more people than I will ever know. The vitality and effectiveness of St. Luke's depends on all of us claiming the power and authority we have as Spirit filled Christians to demonstrate the way of Jesus in our daily lives, not just on Sunday

morning but all day, every day. Each of you have all the permission you need to minister to the needs of others with Christian love. My ordination grants me the power and authority to preach the word, perform the sacraments, and order the life of the church. You don't have to be ordained to be a minister. Your baptism gives you all the authority you need. And with the power and authority you have received because of the Spirit of God that lives within you comes the responsibility to represent Jesus in the world, with humility, and with gratitude that our failures as disciples are forgiven. We all strive to be made perfect in love in this life and grateful that in the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Maybe you have heard the short and sweet prayer offered over a meal that may not be the greatest: "Lord, bless this mess." Well, you and I are messy in our attempts at following Jesus. God blesses our mess anyway. So claim the power and authority you have and keep working through the messiness of being a follower of Jesus. We do this best when we do it together.

The second thing I want us to reflect on is empowerment, sharing the power we have been given. For Elisha to take the place of Elijah he needed to be empowered. He asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. He does receive the Spirit. But he also receives something else: Elijah's mantle. This mantle is a piece of cloth that Elijah wore over his shoulders, sort of like this stole I am wearing. Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up and struck the water, causing the Jordan River to part so they could walk across on dry land. Sound familiar, right? And when Elijah gets picked up by the fiery chariot, the mantle gets blown off his shoulders and falls to the ground. Elisha finds it and picks it up. Now the mantle belongs to him. It is a material symbol of his power and authority as a prophet.

There are all kinds of mantles in our world. I have this stole as a symbol of my power and authority as an elder in the United Methodist Church. Some people wear a cross necklace as a Christian symbol. But there are other mantles. The doctor with their white lab coat and stethoscope around their neck. The judge or magistrate wearing their robe. The Cleveland Brown wearing his helmet, pads and uniform. The

police officer with their uniform, badge and sidearm. There are all kinds of mantles that are symbols of power and authority.

At annual conference every year we have a service where clergy who retire are recognized and others are consecrated or ordained to representative ministry. At the end of the service, there is a cool ritual that symbolizes passing the mantle so to speak from one generation to the next. Members from the retiring class of clergy and those recently ordained as deacons or elders participate. In this ritual, a retiring pastor hands to a newly ordained pastor a Bible, a Book of Discipline, a bowl and towel, a communion plate and cup, all symbols of the power and authority the church places in the hands of baptized Christians called to ordained ministry as United Methodists. The mantle is passed on. The work of God continues in this particular way.

So let me get back to the question I asked earlier: how do we as followers of Jesus who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit empower others who are not Christians but are committed to shaping a world that reflects the beloved community that God desires to see? What I am suggesting here is that when it comes to doing the work of God in the world we as Christians don't really need to empower other Christians to this work. Because of our baptism we already have all the power and authority we need. We don't need anyone's permission to be disciples of Jesus Christ. But, to state the obvious, not everyone in our city is a Christian. There are a lot of people who practice another religion or hold to no religion at all that care about the world, that care about our city, that care about the well-being of others and not just themselves. Christians aren't the only people in the world who are committed to love as a way of life. And with the world as messed up as it is, we don't have the luxury to only be in relationship with other Christians. We all need to draw our circles wider so to speak, to make a bigger table, pull up more chairs. When it comes to bringing about the beloved community of God, it takes all kinds of people to bring about the transformation that God longs for.

And let's be honest, there are a lot of people in the world who do not identify as Christians but whose lives reflect the way of Jesus in powerful and inspirational ways. They are making a positive difference

in the world, healing hurts, bringing people together, caring for the earth, running amazing non-profits that empower so many people to make a positive change in the world. I sometimes wonder that for this church going forward our priority should not be creating new ministries so much as identifying some great ministries that are already happening in our community, church related or not, and to join in. The point I'm trying to make is that God accomplishes God's work in many different ways, not only through the church. We are not the only means for God's will to be accomplished.

But I want to end this with one last thought. There are people in our communities, Christians or not, who have the idea in their heads that they can't make a difference and that they have nothing to offer. There are people who need somebody in their life who sees their potential and empowers them, gives them permission, to serve something greater than themselves. These are people that need someone who believes in them, who can mentor them, who can push them to give back to society, to help other people, to make a positive contribution in the world. I am sure there are people in our communities who want to make a difference and are just waiting for someone to ask them to get involved. Who are these people? Do you know anyone that you could reach out to and encourage? I'm not necessarily asking you to think about people you can invite to come to church, although, that's always a great thing to think about. I'm asking you to think about who you know who needs someone to give them permission to do good in the world, to give of themselves for others. I invite you to mull this over and pray about it. Maybe God will place someone in your mind and even suggest to you ways you could reach out to that person and encourage them to get involved in some way to make the world a better place. In this way, I believe, you are sharing the power of the Holy Spirit with that person. God could be working through you to influence that person to one day become a Christian themselves. But whether or not that happens, you empowering another is a way for God's agenda of bringing about the beloved community can advance. And that is something worth doing.