

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14  
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“Leadership and Trust”

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This story Of Elijah and Elisha seems written for an IMAX film director to take up in full 3D. Imagine your ears filled with sounds of rushing wind in 7.1 Dolby digital surround sound, your DreamViewer lounge chair vibrating as you feel the power. You would curl up as chariots and horses march in from every side of the screen. Stepping off the 60 ft. IMAX screen into your lap. You would watch as Elijah is carried into heaven, your hearts pumping, your necks straining backward hoping to see the mantle fall to the ground so Elisha would be dubbed the new leader.

The movie would flashback into the life of the older prophet. We would hear his scathing denunciation of King Ahaziah. See him angering King Ahab and Queen Jezebel when, like a last action hero, he defeated the 450 prophets of Baal. We would see him fleeing across the land and coming to rest under a broom tree, where food and drink would magically appear from God. We would see him in the cave watching and listening for the word of God as the wind, earthquake and fire pass by, only to hear God’s voice in a still small whisper. What drama, what flair, what adventure!

Then Elisha the younger would enter the picture. We would see the journey to Gilgal, then to Bethel, then Jericho, and finally across the Jordan River where the older prophet uses the mantle to divide the waters.

Joan Chittister writes, “Prophets are those who take life as it is and expand it. They refuse to shrink a vision of tomorrow to the boundaries of yesterday.”

As Elijah passes his mantle to Elisha in 2 Kings today we are given a springboard to talk about leadership, and the role of God. The church faces leadership questions all the time. A colleague of mine has a wonderful way to talk about spiritual leadership. She is a pioneering pastor and when she takes a position, people often say, “Wow you have big shoes to fill, people really loved the last leader.” And she responds, “Actually I don’t have big shoes to fill, because I have a whole different pair of shoes, very unlike the shoes of anyone who came before me, or anyone who will come after me.”

There are those old jokes which reveal how the church struggles with visionary leadership, remember these.... How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? None, Lutherans don’t believe in change? How many UCC’ers does it take to change a light bulb? 6 -- One to change the light bulb and 5 to discuss how much better the old bulb was.

Yet church consultants and professionals are teaching the church this anti-change attitude is one factor in the decline of membership faced by the mainline church in the U.S. The experts are saying the church has to be ready year after year to try new things, to make mistakes, to fail, and often to succeed. The experts tell us the church has to be more nimble in rolling out new ideas and making a way for people to shape new goals and vision for the church. The church

today, we are told, has to think boldly out of the box. Let me share some examples of churches and pastors who think out of the box.

Concerns about money is one way churches resist being bold and thinking out of the box. A new idea is proposed and the response is, "Well it just isn't in the budget." One sister congregation in the UCC changed this. They added a line item to their annual budget titled "Innovative Ministries." It may sound crazy but a congregation much smaller than Emanuel sets aside \$2000 a year so if someone brings a bold new idea, the council won't be able to turn it down for lack of budgeting. That means, when a new idea is proposed at this church, the conversation becomes centered, not on money, but on how a new idea fits into the mission statement of the congregation.

Tradition, or what I call the, "We've never done it that way before," syndrome is another way churches suppress new ideas and bold initiatives. But I just heard of a church that instituted a 5 minute rule in the meetings of their governing board. Simply put, any idea, any idea at all that someone proposes receives five minutes of putting our minds and hearts together in positive conversation before any criticism is offered. Imagine what might happen if we opened up that kind of space in church meetings allowing ideas to percolate and take shape before any criticism is offered.

A final way churches resist change that I want to mention this morning is micromanaging. Micromanaging is when decision makers try to control every little element of a project or program that has come before them. I have sat at meetings where Church Councils spent over 20 minutes discussing the type of potato salad the Christian Education board should serve at the teacher's appreciation dinner. Micromanaging takes the focus off the mission and ministry and puts it on a person who wants to control things.

In response to this I read about a church which prints its mission statement in large print and has these sheets laying around during their council meetings. The idea is the council is there to discuss ministry and mission not menus. So if a board member begins to micromanage an idea, someone else has permission to ask, "Is our discussion directly related to the mission of the church?" The answer in the case of the potato salad, more than likely, would be no and the board would be freed to spend that 20 minutes more focused on Christ's mission and ministry.

Everytime we celebrate a baptism we repeat the United Church of Christ statement of faith. It reflects the most powerful gift God gives to leaders in the church -- the gift of trust.

So to close this message I invite you reflect upon the leadership abilities God has given each of you, and listen to the statement assuring us we belong to a God we can trust.

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify: You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.