



The New England Church Pulpit

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WHAT DO YOU WANT?

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2 Kings 2.1-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for God has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

Elijah said to him again, "Elisha, stay here in Bethel; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. Then Elijah said to him a third time, "Stay here in Jericho; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan River. Then Elijah took the cloak he was wearing, the symbol of his authority, and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what you want from me before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you. As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching until they were out of sight.

Elisha picked up Elijah's cloak and went back to the bank of the Jordan, and struck the water with it. When he did this, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

I suspect it's true of all of us that we would like to inherit the best qualities of the people we admire, whether it be a parent, a teacher, business colleague or admired friend. We admire their sensitivity; their savvy understanding of the way life works; their uncanny knack for seeing through the façade to the heart of any matter; their ability to see both sides of any issue; their magnanimity; their non-judgmental, loving demeanor. Who wouldn't want to inherit a double portion of a father's gentle, affirming soul or a mother's strong, resilient character?

This well-known story of Elijah and Elisha, which comes in the middle of the account of Elijah's encounter with God at Mount Horeb, is a story of personal integrity in passing along the mantle of leadership to those who come after. Elijah's encounter with God has two parts. First, God is made known to Elijah not in earthquake, wind or fire but in a still small voice, "a sheer sound of silence,"

one translation says. This is followed by a command to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, Jehu to be king over Israel, and Elisha to be prophet in Elijah's place. Hazael will indeed become king of Syria and Jehu king of Israel, but it is Elisha, not Elijah, who presides over these events, taking Elijah's place.

The phrase that I find interesting, and that rests at the center of the story, is the question Elijah asks Elisha after the frustrating experience of the understudy clinging on when the wise prophet wants him to stay behind. Even though this passing of the mantle from the experienced to the novice seems to be directed by the divine, the prophet still asks the would-be: What do you want from me? What do you want? Maybe he's irritated that he, the wise and experienced, won't live to see the rewards from his many years of labor.

Can't you just hear Elijah spitting out his response when he knows darn well he's being replaced: Whatta **you** want? What **do** you want? **Now** what do you want? It could be the voice of a frustrated parent who's been nagged by a child over and over again. What do you **want** from me?

It's a good question. It's an important question. It is always better to ask the question than to assume we know the answer. Perhaps it was a test to make sure that the young guy is not looking for personal fame or to become a prophet, with a "ph" for a profit, with an "f." So the question is a good one for all of us: what do you want?

Theologian Brett Younger was asked the question by his family for his birthday. What do you want? At this stage of the game, he said, it isn't as simple as it used to be: a tennis racket; a sports car? "But," he said "since I don't play tennis anymore and I get good mileage with my Escort, I finally came up with three wishes:

1. To have the garage cleaned.
2. Six pairs of identical black socks so that if you lose one, you're still in business.
3. Six pairs of white athletic socks with blue stripes so that they can be identified when another member of his family borrows them.

We come to church routinely to explore the question: what do you want? On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah asked Jesus: "What do you want?" At the Jordan River, Elijah asked Elisha: "What do you want?"

"Elisha is Robin to Elijah's Batman," says Younger. "Tonto to his Lone Ranger, and on the wildest days, Cheetah to his Tarzan." Elisha had followed Elijah with admiration and amazement from the day the prophet threw his mantle, the cloth that is the symbol of a prophet, on the young man's head, signifying the future handing over of leadership. Together they'd gone to Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan. And each time Elijah had entreated Elisha to stay back. Perhaps Elijah didn't want to face the task of handing over his power and prestige to the young upstart. "Stay here, alone?" Elisha retorts. "Not on your life. I'm not letting you out of my sight." The calling is strong; the admiration too great; the prospects of walking in his shoes too exciting to hang back.

What do you want? Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, but the latter responds he can't guarantee that; only God gives such gifts. Yet Elisha is told that if he keeps his eye on the God who will receive Elijah in the golden chariot, he will, indeed, inherit.

Those who are wise keep their eye on those we admire; to emulate their best efforts; to see what makes them great; what it is we admire in them; what it is about them that has made the world a better place. We keep our eye on the God in them so that as they leave us we can claim part of their spirit in the way we learn to live. (“What Do You Want” by Brett Younger; as printed in *Lectionary Homiletics* June 30, 2013)

My grandmother was a mindful person. She wouldn't have thought of herself that way; it's just the way she was. She could look out the car window and see a beautiful farm with a well-kept barn and cattle grazing lazily in the pasture. The rest of us just commented on the smell. She would spend hours over a hot stove canning peaches in the humid days of August and at the end of a day hold up a jar of her peaches to the light and admire the beauty of that sparkling jar that held the rewards of her labor. We just saw all the work that it took to get there. She could sit on the front porch during a thunderstorm and marvel at the streak lightning, the sound and smell of the rain as it hit the roof, the anticipation of the next clap of thunder. All we thought about was that we couldn't go to the zoo as planned. She could hear in the rooster crowing at the break of dawn the prospects of a new day. We just heard an annoying sound that disturbed our slumber. This quality is something about her that I want to inherit from her. She always said that we were cut from the same cloth, so perhaps someday when I grow up, I'll receive her mantle of mindful living.

What do you want? A good job and a good home? Help others? Take it easy? To get into shape and get the house in better shape? To learn a new skillset or whittle away at the Bucket List? When we're young, we want to be successful and look successful. We want the profit, with an “f.” And when the dream of being a beauty queen or a sports hero seems more unlikely as the years go on, a hot cup of tea or a gin and tonic on the porch sound nice.

But we need to keep asking: what do we want from our lives? We tend to avoid the question until something dramatic happens, until someone dies or we think about our own mortality. When his teacher was about to die, Elisha thought about what he wanted out of life. Life is defined by death, and the closer the latter comes, the more focused the former becomes.

Two battleships assigned to a training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy fog and storms for several days. As darkness fell one evening, the watch on the bridge of the lead battleship spied a light on the starboard bow. “Is it steady or moving astern?” asked the captain. “Steady, Captain,” replied the lookout, which meant they were on a dangerous collision course with that ship. “Signal that ship to say we're on a collision course and advise they change course twenty degrees,” called the captain. Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees.” The captain said, “Send: I'm a captain; change course twenty degrees.” Back came the response: “I'm a seaman second-class. You had better change course twenty degrees,” By this time the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send: I'm a battle ship. Change course twenty degrees!” Back came the flashing light, “I'm a lighthouse.” The ship changed course immediately.

What we want changes as we gain insight into the realities of life. What do you want? God help us be more like those prophets of hope than to follow those who profit from power and personal gain. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our God, creator of time, we gather today to wait on your presence. In creating us in your image you have in your wisdom and love made us creatures of time. In this our moment of corporate confession, we would confess that in these times of instant everything, our patience wears thin when we have to wait. We want everything now and find delayed gratification an unacceptable way of living. We push the elevator button several times to get to our floor faster. We are less than tolerant of those who keep us waiting, feeling that our time is more important than theirs. We keep pushing, racing our engines and taking chances to gain five seconds in getting to the next appointment so we can check it off our list and drive fast to get to the next one.

Sometimes it seems that great distances exist between the high points of our lives. Time moves swiftly and we tend to let it slip away without making it count while we wait for another high experience. We discount it as nothing unless we have reached some spectacular height, accomplished some great thing, and have passed ten other people along the way. We clamor after things that disappear as quickly as the waves on the shore, forgetting that the important and valuable assets of life come from a steady, slow investment in values that last beyond our own lifetime.

Teach us to know that we are not idle when we stand still, watching, listening, to seek your presence in the sounds of nature and people around us. Teach us to accept the gift of the present moment that will quickly pass away. Open our ears and our hearts that we may be attuned to the wondrous world around us, and instill within us a holy peace to ease the angst of what might happen next. Give us insight into the future that we may invest in those who will come after us, building foundations that will last for generations even if it means sacrificing something of our own desires now. In the name of the one who taught us to ponder the delights of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, Amen.

(Adapted from a prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick)