

Walking with a Disciple

1 Kings 19:19-21

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Every life leaves behind some type of legacy. What about you? What will be the legacy of your life?

Most of you are in some form of leadership. Some are leading the nation. Others are leading in offices, hospitals, classrooms, or the church. Many spend their days caring for the great needs of small children. All these forms of leadership are critical in the kingdom of God.

In the words of T.S. Elliot, "A culture needs its minor as well as its major poets." The major poets express the truths by which a nation will live. The minor poets inculcate those truths, one person at a time. Elijah was serving as Israel's major poet when he stood on Mt. Carmel asking the people, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions. If the Lord be God follow him, but if Baal then follow him," But as the Lord reminded Elijah, he had 7,000 other prophets in Israel who were going to be critical to the renewal of the people. National renewal always requires both major and minor prophetic/poetic voices. So whether you are one of our major or minor poets, you have been called to lead someone into a discovery of the eternal truths by which we live.

These truths are bigger and greater than you are. They are bigger and greater than the people you are leading. They are the eternal truths that grab hold of a life and inspire us to use our fleeting years for purposes that will outlast us. And thus, they are the truths that give our lives eternal meaning. This is why Jesus taught his disciples truth in a poetry they spent their lives trying to understand. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." "Only those who lose their lives will find them."

Similarly, our nation's most historic leaders continue to inspire us with a legacy of poetic words. The Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..." Lincoln's Second Inaugural: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God give us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds...." Franklin D. Roosevelt: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: "I have a dream of a day. . . when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing... Free at last, free at last, Great God A-mighty we are free at last."

None of the major poets who spoke those words lived to see their words fulfilled. It is the truth that is eternal, not the poet.

Over the course of this church's 207 years, 19 minor poets have filled this pulpit to speak the eternal truth of a gospel that will continue to outlive all your pastors. Equally important, when volunteers in our nursery sit in rocking chairs cradling children in their arms, they aren't there just to offer child care. They are serving as minor poets who begin the eternal lessons that we are held by God. Later, others in the church will take over the ministry that begins in those arms. When I was a child my father taught me to memorize scripture. (Actually, he made me do it.) Those eternal words of God have continued to guide me long after my father stopped. You too are probably still trying to live up to the ideals and virtues that were given to you by your parents, grandparents, teachers, and mentors. Many of them are no longer with you but their legacy continues to be your teacher. Again, it is the truth that is eternal, not the poet.

One of the most critical things for a leader to know is how to stop leading. Being a leader is not an essential ingredient in your identity. Your identity is rooted in being a beloved child of God. All God's

children are given missions to fulfill. Some of these missions involve leadership, for a while, but the time comes for all leaders when they must pass the mantle of leadership to another.

It was God who told the prophet Elijah to anoint Elisha to be his successor. So Elijah went to the place where Elisha was at work, plowing his fields. He was plowing with twelve teams of oxen. That's a lot of oxen, which means Elisha was doing all right for himself before he was called by God.

When Elijah saw the young farmer, he didn't say a word, but simply threw his mantle on Elisha's shoulders and kept on walking. The prophet's mantle in those days was made of animal skin. It hung over the shoulder and marked the wearer as God's poet for the people. You'll remember that when the Lord passed by Elijah on Mt. Horeb, the prophet covered his face with that mantle, which meant the mantle absorbed the glory of God. So when Elisha discovered this mantle now on his shoulders, he knew exactly what it meant. It meant he was called to carry the glory of God among the people as Elijah had done before him.

Elisha ran after Elijah and asked him if he could just say goodbye to his parents first. Elijah responded by saying, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" Which isn't exactly the same as, "Welcome aboard, we're glad to have you." What Elijah meant by that was, "I'm not the one calling you. What you do now is between you and God, because you're not my candidate, but God's."

Here we are given an important insight in transferring leadership: You don't get to pick your successor. God does that. It is his work, his eternal truths, his mantle that is worn, and he will raise up the people he chooses to bear it. Frequently, we are more than a little dismayed by the people who follow us in leadership. Elected officials are often dismayed at who the people elect to succeed them in office. Office managers are often dismayed at who gets appointed to take over. Parents are sometimes dismayed by the spouses their children pick. I can imagine Elijah walking through the fields, scraping ox dung off his sandals, and wondering why in the world God would choose a farmer to stand in his place before Israel.

If you are having a hard time giving up leadership because you do not think there is anyone competent to take over for you, it may help you to remember how inadequate you were when God called you to the position that you are now relinquishing. As the Apostle Paul said, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards... But God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." Remember, it is the truth that is powerful and wise, not the truth-teller. But along the way the truth will shape the teller's life as well.

When Elisha realizes this calling has come from God, he knows that he has no choice but to follow it. He kills his oxen, builds a fire with their yokes, cooks the meat, and gives it to the community to eat. In doing this, he has severed himself from his former life, and committed himself to the calling which is at hand. So he paid a high price to accept this call.

This gives us another insight in transferring the mantle of leadership: People are dying for a call that will lay claim to their lives. You don't have to convince or argue people into accepting it. You just have to call. When they respond, they aren't responding to you, but to the eternal poetry. Why did the disciples leave their fishing nets to follow Jesus? Why did Paul abandon his successful career as a Pharisee? Why did so many young men and women enlist in the armed services after September 11? Because we're all looking to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. And we'll pay any price to find such a calling.

All the leader has to do is speak the poetry. Those with ears to hear will allow their lives to be transformed by it. That's your legacy. It has nothing to do with your agendas, strategic plans, or goals. It has everything to do with the eternal truths by which you live.

The work that you are trying to accomplish won't last long. Whatever it is you are building will not last, because even empires eventually crumble. But truth is eternal, and it lasts from generation to generation. It's the only thing of value that you can leave behind.

You won't be able to leave that legacy, though, unless your life is built upon truth. If it is built upon comfort, avoiding risk, collecting things, or a few happy moments, then you are not going to be able to

leave behind a thing we need. In that case, there was no great purpose to your life.

So now is the time, while you're still in a position to bear influence on those around you, to ask yourself, "What is my mantle? What reflection of the glory of God am I carrying around?" For me it has been to call people to the grace of God. This truth has grabbed hold of me, and I know that my calling is to proclaim it. So do you, since I smuggle it into just about every sermon. If a bus were to hit me today, I hope someone would mention something about grace at my funeral. It is my legacy.

What about you? What eternal legacy will you leave us? Is it the call to justice, or healing, or community, or service, or reconciliation? What are the well worn lines in the sonnet of your life, lines that are so compelling it would make someone slay their oxen to inherit them?

It's an important question, and eternity is waiting for your response.

O God, give us the vision to focus our lives on the eternal truth of Jesus Christ that we may be of use to his eternal work of bringing this world home to you. Amen.