

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 77: 1-2, 11-20  
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson  
July 1, 2007

### Elijah and Elisha

I bring you greetings this morning from the 26<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the United Church of Christ, which met last week in Hartford Connecticut and celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our church's founding. It was church on a grand scale: worship, lectures, workshops, and enough meetings for me to get a good start on knitting my next prayer shawl! There were plenty of occasions for reflecting on the history of our "heady and exasperating" church, and upon our past, present, and future vocation as a community of God's people.

In general, the United Church of Christ aspires to be Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who did not hesitate to speak truth to power, and when we tell our story, we usually emphasize the parts of our tradition that involve prophetic speech and action. We like to list our "firsts": the first experiment in democracy (New England Congregational meetings), the first act of civil disobedience (the Boston Tea Party in 1773), the first published African American Poet (Phillis Wheatley, also in 1773), the first African American ordained by a protestant denomination (Lemuel Haynes in 1785), the first woman ordained (Antoinette Brown in 1853), the first advocacy for public control of the airwaves (in 1959), the first openly gay person ordained (Bill Johnson in 1972), the first African American leader of an integrated denomination (UCC President Joseph Evans, in 1976), and the first mainline inclusive language Christian resources (the Book of Worship and the New Century Hymnal). We also remember with pride the role of Congregational Church members in freeing the African captives from the Amistad, the early support of the abolitionist movement, the saving of the liberty bell (by burying it under the floorboards of the Old Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, PA, during the Revolutionary War), and the authorship of the "serenity prayer," and the support of Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers in California. All in all, we have pretty good credentials as Elijah.

The text we heard today, however, does not praise Elijah – it replaces him with a younger fellow, Elisha. In one of the Hebrew Scriptures most dramatic scenes, Elijah is taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire. The prelude and postlude to this glorious scene are the same: the parting of the Jordan River in response to a tap from Elijah's rolled-up mantle. The final image we have is of Elisha, walking back across the Jordan, headed for his own vocation, his own ministry, his own prophetic words.

If there was a key image at the General Synod, it was a panorama of the bleachers in the Hartford Civic Center: males and females, varied ages, varied races, and varied clothing – though the clothes were pretty much a variation on a casual theme. What a contrast to the life-size reproduction of the photo taken on June 25, 1957, when the UCC was formed! That picture (which you can see on the UCC website) is of a long

column of ministers walking down the street. Nearly all are white men, and they are wearing suits and ties under their robes. Clearly, the mantle has been passed to a new generation – a new generation of members, a new generation of leaders.

So, perhaps, it is time to think of ourselves as Elisha, instead of as Elijah, and to think about just what it is, exactly, that we have inherited, and what we expect to do with our forebear's mantle.

Those reflections were part of our gathering in Hartford, too. We celebrated the ministry of the late Rev. Scott Libby, longtime executive for the old Board of World Ministries, and the retirement of the Rev. Joe Malayang, who has been the executive of our Local Church Ministries in Cleveland. We thanked outgoing officers and board members, and welcomed and installed new ones. And we cheered for a presentation by the Youth and Young Adult Council (one member of which is coming to St. Olaf next fall and will be worshipping with us), and for the introduction of new churches that have joined the UCC since the last General Synod – 80 of them! The handing of the mantle from one generation to another happens over and over again.

Sadly, not all of what is handed on is valuable or healthy. Old feuds and rivalries, garbled or inarticulate priorities, lingering doubts, not to mention power and money (or their absence) can also be in the mix. I will not pass along all of the gossip I heard about our various covenanted ministries (which you may remember as instrumentalities, from an earlier organizational scheme), but it appears that the church is not at all immune to these hazards. A genuine mantle is ragged, worn, and moth eaten.

To hear some people tell it, the mantle that Elijah handed to American mainline Protestants has come to be a lot like Harry Potter's "Invisibility cloak." We remember with nostalgia the many years in which Protestants were prominent in the political, economic, and civil leadership of our country and culture, and lament that our efforts now seem invisible – or perhaps trivial – to the world around us.

For other people, Elijah's mantle feels like a heavy burden. It comes with responsibilities and duties so weighty that the everyday joys of life are flattened with guilt, frustration, or exhaustion. How can there be time to "smell the roses," if we are called to speak truth to power and minister to the needs of the world, too?

It is good to remember that Elijah offered Elisha not only his mantle, but also a gift, and the gift that Elisha chose was a "double share of your spirit." [2 Kings 2:9]. We might well – both as individuals and as a church – make that same request for a double share of spirit.

The truth is that aspiring to be Elisha just as difficult as aspiring to be Elijah – a marathon and not a sprint. Only a well-nourished and well-exercised spirit has the endurance needed for accepting, wearing, and passing along the mantle worn by these ancient prophets. If the United Church of Christ is to be a faithful prophet in the world today, we must also be faithful in our worship, our education, and our piety. Attending

to the health of our souls is not a retreat from our engagement with the powers and principalities; it is the foundation that makes that engagement possible.

One more truth: even Elisha must someday pass along the mantle to the one who follows him. The transfer of authority and responsibility is not usually as dramatic as the story we heard today; chariots and horses of fire are not present at our annual meeting when new church leaders take office, or when new Sunday School teachers assume their duties, or when new groups form around needs and issues. The waters of the Jordan do not usually roll back out of the way to make space for new ideas, new structures, or new priorities.

The mantle of prophetic and healing faith was not just handed along once, long ago and far away. We are always engaged in this process, always both Elijah and Elisha, always both receiving and bestowing, always both beginning and ending. So I give thanks for the faithfulness and courage and imagination of both Elijah and Elisha, and expect to see them both in church every week.

Amen.

### **Prayer for July 1, 2007**

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of all nations, we lift our prayers today for *our* nation, as we approach the celebration of our national birthday.

We offer, first, our prayers of thanksgiving for the privilege of life in these United States: for political liberty, for a historic commitment to justice, for economic well-being, and for freedom of conscience. We are grateful for the ways that this country offers us peace and prosperity, and holds up ideals to which we subscribe.

At the same time, we confess that our nation has not always lived up to those ideals. We have let our country's self-interest influence our relationship with other countries, and have insisted that our political and economic system be a model for cultures that are based on values different from ours. We have failed to extend the civil rights we hold dear to everyone around us, and have been tempted to restrict the rights of some

of our citizens. In particular we have failed to heal the wounds of racism, and continue to tolerate its lingering effects among us.

We confess, too, that we have been reluctant to extend the hospitality of our continent to immigrants who have arrived later than we did. We have forgotten the power of our message to those who are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and have built walls of limitations, regulations, and even barbed-wire to protect our own freedom at the price of theirs.

For all these failures, Lord, we ask your pardon, because we do truly love our nation, and we continue to wish for its wholeness, its promise, and its integrity. Fill us with the resolve to restore our country to its idealism, and hope, and self-discipline. Help us to find the issues and values that bring us together, and teach us to live in harmonious tension around the issues that display our differences.

And give us humble hearts, we pray. Keep us mindful that we are only one nation among your people, and that our way is not the only way. Guide us in perfecting our own vision of justice and peace, and in offering to others rather than forcing it upon them.

And help us, God of our hearts, to carry our most precious Christian convictions into our civic life: our commitment to the dignity of all God's people, our striving for reconciliation and healing, our investment in peace, and our hunger for justice. May the proof of our success be found not in the wealth of the successful, but in the welfare of those who are the most vulnerable and most fragile.

All this we pray in the name of the one who inspires our deepest convictions, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

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