

“A Double-Portion of the Spirit”

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2 Kings 2:1-14

This passage was one of the texts for the sermon by Bishop Dwayne Royster on Sunday at General Synod in Cleveland. Synod was so energizing for me to see the denomination of the UCC writ so large. We only see a little bit of what the UCC is like in this area. This is a denomination diverse theologically, racially, economically, and across ages (there were younger pastors than me!) and ways of expressing sexuality and gender.

All this was so energizing too, because sometimes being a progressive person of faith can feel like a David-Goliath experience. We're the scrappy but righteous underdogs facing the huge and loud public face of more conservative Christianity. But this gathering was thousands of people who may not think exactly the way I do. But because of our faith, we strive for the same work of doing justice, acting with compassion, and loving God and neighbor. And being all together, knowing that so many others are share this hope of a transformed world, was energizing and hopeful.

So this passage framed the primary worship of General Synod, and it's a fitting passage for a people in an in-between time. The theme of the event was “Unexpected Places” and this is where Elijah and Elisha find themselves, on the other side of the Jordan.

This chunk of story of Elijah and Elisha details lots of familiar places. If there was a map, these places, Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, would have stars and bold print marking them. They're high-profile landmarks in the story of the Israelites. The Israelites camped at Gilgal after they crossed the Jordan River. Bethel was a sacred site, where Jacob had dreamed of a ladder to heaven and awoke knowing that surely, God was in this place. Jericho is that place of the walls coming tumbling down in military victory for the Israelites. Yet Elijah's ascension takes place on the other side of the Jordan, on the other side of all these familiar things, in unknown territory. The mantle of prophethood passed to Elisha is picked up in a place not clearly marked on a map. There are no obvious landmarks to orient yourself here, besides the Jordan you just crossed over.

This is where the church is these days—looking back over a territory where everything felt strong and familiar. There are places, looking back, of grand and obvious importance. Stories of power and privilege. And now, we're looking at what it means to still pick up that mantle of prophethood on the other side of the Jordan. To still be that prophetic voice in a territory new and unfamiliar.

This can feel discouraging, looking around this territory. Many of us heard about the most recent Pew poll that showed mainline church attendance dropping drastically in the last eight years.

Phyllis Tickle, a sociologist of religion, suggests a broad thesis: that roughly every 500 years, there is some major upheaval in Christianity. It's like the Church holds "a giant rummage sale, shattering the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity," with three results: A more vital form of Christianity emerges, the dominant form is re-formed into a more pure and fresher version of itself, and this is newly compelling to those who witness it. First 500: Rise of monasticism. 1000 CE: the Great Schism that formed the Western Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, complete with the sideshow of the Crusades. 1500 CE: The Great Reformations, Protestant and Catholic alike.

Now, we are coming to that moment where things are changing drastically again in Christianity. Church has enjoyed a respected and prominent role as a major civic institution, and it isn't in the same way anymore. No institutions are, really. But fortunately, the power of the church isn't in being a civic institution on the main drag next to the library, the city hall, and the town bank. The power of the church is in the radical message of Jesus we find in the gospels—that the poor and outcast are actually especially beloved by God, that real power is in the heart of vulnerability. Our call is to make this worldview reality.

So much energy is spent on "how are we relevant?" I think the answer lies in, if we speak the truth so many are noticing and feeling, we won't wonder how to be relevant. We *will* be relevant.

A question posed in worship by Bishop Royster at Synod: What does church have to say to people whose backs are up against the wall? If we are compassionately and honestly addressing the soul-and-body-killing dynamics at play in our world right now, we won't need to struggle to be relevant.

More than ever, this matters. When income inequality is not only leaving those in poverty with fewer and fewer resources and lower wages but also reinforcing blame in the guise of “laziness” on those most vulnerable, we have a message of power. When children of color are shot and killed or thrown to the ground while playing, while walking home, while hanging out at the pool, our faith has a message of power. When the consequences to our earth’s environment of the high consumption of a privileged few is borne on the backs and the flooded and degraded subsistence farms of those in the developing world, we have a message of power.

Our message of power, witnessed in the law, the prophets, and the gospels, is to love your neighbor as yourself. And your neighbor is not only that person right next to you who looks just like you in every way. It is your neighbor in the different neighborhood, the neighbor who has a second home and the neighbor who relies on paycheck loans. Your neighbor who speaks a language you don’t understand but loves the way the light falls on her daughter’s hair on a quiet morning just like you do with your child. Our message of power is to create a world that values people, every person, over things and convenience. And that love of neighbor, writ broadly, looks like justice.

The prophetic voice is loving the world, and the people in it, enough to tell the truth about what’s going on in our world. And, like Elisha knew, we need a double portion of the wisdom that God has offered. We need a double portion of the power God has given, a double portion of the vision for a transformed world which God calls us to, even as things feel uncertain.

Before Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind, Elisha asks him for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. The double portion is what the firstborn son and true heir receives, based on Deuteronomy. Yet in chapters previous, Elijah had already taken him in close like a son, placing his mantle on his shoulders and Elisha bidding his family goodbye to join Elijah’s journeys. So what if it is not just a plea to be recognized as a son, but a plea for a surplus of vision and power for the days ahead? Perhaps Elisha had seen all the crap and corruption Elijah had been compelled to call out, and he knew he needed double the strength Elijah had to speak truth and heal his community in the days ahead.

We’re in the midst of a great upheaval in how people are church together. And it feels a little daunting, but what I mostly feel is excited. I am excited that that way forward is not so proscribed, so that we can make the path by walking it. I’m excited to discern what is core to our identity, in our particular time and place, and to live from that.

As we forge that path, there are some resources we have in our heritage. Elisha, in the stunned grief of losing his mentor, pick up the mantle that has drifted to the ground and does this ancient action—he strikes the water, and it parts. Like Moses striking the Jordan with his staff, and even like God parting the waters, his gesture ties him into an old story; a heritage.

We too, in church, gather and execute these ancient gestures that actually are rich with power in their heritage. These potent gestures look like people who get together, who pray for each other, welcome all saying, “come, rest here. There’s bread and juice. Tell me your story.”

Our role now is to tell the stories of how being part of a spiritual community saves our lives, how we witness to the new things God is doing in a church of powerful witness.

There is a new way of being church arising, and it doesn’t look like the old establishment just-show-up-because-its Sunday sort of church. It is becoming more honest about the messy work of loving a broken world. It is about living out of grace that affirms the worth and value of all people.

We have some great tools here. We share our stories of vulnerability, in worship, before God. We have a respect for the spiritual journey of each person—we don’t need to tell each other, or our children, what God should look like, but we help each other learn the language to describe what we sense with our hearts. We are a church of the Spirit, and our practices as a community leave us open to all the new ways it is poured out.

General Synod was a transformative experience, and if you ever get the opportunity, go. But the work of the church, the real transfiguring of our culture, when it comes down to it, does not happen with a handful of delegates going to a far-off city and voting to resolutions of witness. We have these events and decisions to point back to, but the real change doesn’t come from a denominational vote. Real change happens here, on the ground, with the hearts and hands of people like you.

What does our community, our neighborhood of the gorge, need? What sort of spirit do you need a double portion of to be that change?