

“Pick Up the Mantle”
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

It is graduation Sunday today and we are celebrating an important milestone for our young people especially those who are graduating from high school. This not only signifies the ending of their basic education, but it is also the milestone of their entry into the adult world. All your years of education up to high school were in preparation for this important step when you are supposed to be able to continue the journey as an independent adult. But what does adulthood and responsibility mean for you? What should it look like?

There is a list on the internet about knowing when you are not a kid anymore. Here are some of the signs of adulthood:

1. You enjoy watching the news.
2. The phone rings and you hope it's not for you.
3. Your car has four doors.
4. You're proud of your lawn mower.
5. You no longer think of speed limits as a challenge.
6. You consider coffee one of the most important things in life.
7. 8 AM is your idea of "sleeping in".
8. You write thank you notes without being told.

So what does adulthood and responsibility look like? Of course the answer is different for each one of us because we are all unique in our own ways. But the question remains before all of us: What is my purpose in life? Why am I here on this earth? What is my unique contribution to the world? How do we discover the answer to this in our lives?

One of graduates this year wrote a very interesting letter of application for one of the scholarships. This is what he said, “I believe that God puts all men and women here on Earth for a purpose, whether it is to die in a car crash so as to enlighten a younger sibling to the dangers of drunk driving, or to marry, grow old, and have children that will one day do great things.” What this young person is saying is that each of you has a unique role in life that only you can fulfill in your own unique way. Each of us is born not with an order or a plan to do certain things but with gifts and unique ways to be part of God’s creative work in the world. Yet, the key is that each of us needs the mentoring and loving nurture of a community in order to discover and use those gifts. That is why even as our young people graduate today, they are not on their own. They are not to jump into the abyss of adulthood without the support of their families, friends and church because this is a life-long process.

This was certainly the case for both Elijah and Elisha in the life of ancient Israel. Elijah had served as one of the strong prophetic voices of his time speaking against the injustices of Israel’s royalty and their ways of oppressing people. He had to flee many times for his life. But that was the call of his life and nothing could have changed his mind. When the time came for him to die, Elijah entrusted his ministry to one of his disciples, Elisha. But before that happened we know that there was a long period of time when Elisha was being mentored and prepared for this step of leadership. He was part of a school of the prophets which is mentioned several times in 1st and 2nd Kings. The two men journeyed together on Elijah’s last tour of holy places and sanctuaries in the area. They go to Bethel, Gilgal, and Jericho. These were important locations for Elijah to visit with Elisha because in those places great transitions of leadership took place in the past. Following in the footsteps of other leaders and mentors from the past, Elijah and Elisha tour these historic places. Gilgal, for example, was the place where Joshua set up the 12 stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. This happened after Joshua was able to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land after Moses had left. So, this was a time of

clear transition of leadership and Elijah was preparing the next prophet leader for Israel. There were at least 50 other prophets, but they needed a leader after Elijah. This was a critical time in the life of the people of Israel. It was time of great division and weakness among Israel's political leaders. Ahab, the oppressive and corrupt king had just died and a new king was rising. The nations around the divided nation of Israel were rising and ready to take over them. The need to hear the word of God was so great and so desperate for the people of Israel. The ministry of the prophets of Israel needed to continue, but Elijah was not the one to continue this ministry. It was his successor, Elisha, who was supposed to continue his ministry. Elisha was different from Elijah in his own way. Yet, the same Spirit that guided Elijah was given to Elisha. The symbol of that transition was the mantle that belonged to Elijah and then was received by Elisha. What is a mantle? This is not a word we use today. What it refers to is the outer cloak of a person, basically an overcoat. It was a symbol of power or authority. In fact, the Hebrew word for mantle in our text today, *add-deh-reth*, comes from a root word meaning *power*. So, passing it on to his disciple meant passing on the leadership and authority of the teacher. Catholic priests till this day wear a mantle following in that tradition. Also, when you think of superheroes you see that one of the most important symbols of their super power is the cape. Think about our graduates today and their attire. Cap and gown have become symbols of knowledge and the readiness of a person to earn a degree.

This story of transition of leadership from Elijah to Elisha calls us today to consider the mantles of our lives. What mantles are you called to pick up? What mantles are you called to pass on to others? What missions is God calling you to fulfill? What missions are you called to pass on to others? Who are your mentors and guides? Who are the people you are mentoring?

This is how life is shared. This is how faith is shared. Studies indicate that the best way to master any endeavor is to imitate exactly someone who has mastered it. Think about the ministry of Jesus himself. He did not finish all the work he needed to do while he was alive. His disciples whom he mentored and taught for several years were the ones that continued his ministry and took to a higher level. The Church today is entrusted with the same ministry. We are not just called to come and learn. We are called to learn, teach and serve. Our faith is not something we are to keep for ourselves. Think of the people who founded this congregation. Their commitment to pass on the faith is the reason we are here today. Their decision to organize and establish a congregation became a blessing to many generations after them.

The power of community and mentoring is essential to our lives. You can read the Bible on your own, but it is so much more powerful when we do it in community and we share our stories as they relate to the stories of our ancestors. In every field, in life mentoring and community is so important. For example, Michael Jordan didn't make the basketball team his sophomore year of high school. The coach saw the potential in this young man and offered him the opportunity to meet every morning before school to show him the basics of the game. Michael accepted the offer. From that moment of mentoring, the greatest player of basketball was born.

In her book, *The Mentor's Spirit: Life Lessons on Leadership and the Art of Encouragement*, Marsha Sinetar, notes that, "We need mentors—wise and faithful guides, advisers, or teachers—the wisdom keepers of an entire family, a sprawling corporation, or community. Much more, we need the mentor's spirit: an unseen, affirming influence and positive energy. The mentor's spirit is the heart's posture pervading healthy relationships in every family, classroom or organization....The mentor's spirit animates our life. It moves us toward wholeness and authenticity. It gives us the green light to become distinctive contributors with the context of our life in community....When the mentor's spirit is absent, we find dependency, an erosion of optimism and impaired problem solving."

There is a new book that came out in April written by Bruce Feiler. The title of the book is, *The Council of Dads: My Daughters, My Illness, and the Men Who Could Be Me*. This book came out of the author's struggle with cancer. In July of 2008, Bruce Feiler got out of bed to stop his sobs from waking his wife. Feiler felt so distraught when he looked at his wife and their three-year-old twin daughters and knew that he might be leaving them soon to death. The thought that kept haunting him the most is that his daughters would never know who he was and would never have his influence in their lives. The answer came to him during his pre-dawn vigil. It was the idea of finding several men who can be fathers to his daughters. These men would represent different parts of Feiler's life and experiences and would make the commitment to share these things with his daughters. They indeed would become a council of fathers for his twin daughters. As it turned out, Feiler who is now 45 has been cancer-free for a year. Yet, the six men whom he selected have stood by him and his family and continue to journey with them as mentors and fathers who will help Feiler pass down his mantle to his daughters.

What is your unique purpose here on earth? Who is helping you discover that? Who are you mentoring to help them discover their unique potential in life? What heritage are we leaving for the generations to come? For our high school graduates today I hope this will be a strong reminder for each of you about the value of community and being an active part of a church family. Picking up the mantle of ministry and life takes a lot of courage. Yet, we need to remember that we have a great cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us and those who are walking beside us on this journey. Amen.