

## **THE MENTORING INSTINCT**

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 26, 2022*

*based on II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14*

Here's one of my favorite parables – it's from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

*Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.  
For some there are more pieces.  
For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.  
Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.  
And so it goes.  
Souls going this way and that  
Trying to assemble the myriad parts.  
But know this. You do not have within yourself  
All the pieces to your puzzle.  
Like before the days when they used to seal  
jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that  
All the pieces were there.  
Everyone carries with them at least one and probably  
Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.  
Sometimes they know it.  
Sometimes they don't.  
And when you present your piece  
Which is worthless to you,  
To another, whether you know it or not,  
Whether they know it or not,  
You are a messenger from the Most High.*

What do you make of that? I met Rabbi Kushner a dozen years ago in a forum at Trinity Episcopal in NW where, among other things, he spoke about this poem/parable of his. He ventured to say to us that he believed that most people are missing an average of seven pieces to the puzzle they are born with.

He also said that he believed those pieces we give away and receive do not necessarily go to (or come from) people we'd even want to associate with.

Sure, our spouses have a piece of our puzzle as we have a piece of theirs, but sometimes, for our own puzzle to be complete, we need contact with some people and ideas we may initially find somewhat foreign; out of the blue.

There's a tiny episode in the book of *Genesis* that is Exhibit A for this truth. It's connected with the Bible patriarch, Joseph who you may remember is sold into slavery by his many brothers who are jealous of him because his father gave him a beautiful coat.

Joseph is sent on an errand by his father to locate his brothers – to make sure they are okay. He can't find them and is about to go back home when a nameless man happens along by chance and tells him that he overheard his brothers say that they were on their way to a place called Dothan. That's it. But it makes all the difference in the world. Joseph goes to Dothan and the narrative arc of his being betrayed begins.

Without the nameless man there would be no Joseph story. Joseph would not be sold into slavery in Egypt. He would not have ended up in prison there. He would not have come to the attention of the Pharaoh.

He would not have risen to a position of authority there where he could save his people and the Egyptians from starvation during the famine he saw coming. Without that unnamed man, telling Joseph his brothers were over in Dothan, there would not have been any Jews left in Egypt at the end of the *Genesis* narrative.

And ... because of that there would have been no Exodus, no Moses, no Israel, no King David, no Jerusalem, no Jesus, no Protestant Reformation, no Southminster Presbyterian Church. All because of one nameless man who said, "Oh, I think they went over to Dothan." Human lives, human history, turns on such things.

So, think about it for a minute, so many of the people who make the most profound difference to us in our lives walk onto the stage of our life for a moment or an hour and then walk off it a minute later.

Then, days weeks, months, years, maybe decades later, we look back, realizing how important a part they played in our story, and we remark, "I didn't even catch her name."

Remember Joseph Campbell who said, "Follow your bliss." Now, listen, here is the rest of what he said. He said, "Follow your bliss and doors will open for you where you didn't know there would be doors." That's the kicker.

Jane Goodall, in her wonderful memoir, REASON FOR HOPE, tells how she received one indispensable puzzle piece at a young age. She says that she had two irrepressible ideas in her head as a child: animals and Africa.

Coming, as she did, from a very poor family, how could she realize any dreams, she wondered? There was no way she could afford college. Instead she went to secretarial school. One day in her early twenties she received a note from a long lost friend, now living in Kenya. Would she like to come for a visit? Of course.

While there she heard about the work of a Palentologist named Louis Leaky. At the time he was fifty-four and full of the mentoring instinct. He was looking for a protégé, but he didn't want some graduate student. He wanted someone he could train from scratch. Jane was perfect. He and his wife took Jane under their wing and with infinite patience, enabled her to become the Jane Goodall we know and admire today; the woman who lived among the chimpanzees. Leaky did not make her over in his image. He just made it possible for her to become all she was meant to be.

That's what I want to discuss today – this mentoring instinct. The mentoring instinct is strong in us. There comes a time in most lives when we are immensely ready to be mentored, and there comes a time when we are immensely ready to mentor. How wonderful when, by the grace of God, mentor and mentee find one another.

So. Who mentored you? Was it someone you might have expected it to be?

Teachers are often cited; teachers who offered more than information – but who shared pieces of their lives; teachers who saw things in their students the students may not have seen themselves.

This morning's Old Testament text about Elijah and Elisha is rich with metaphors about such a relationship. Elijah has come to the end of his life and work. He is a grand old man of prophecy. He and his protégé, Elisha, walk together toward the River Jordan.

I hope you noted the details – Elijah takes off his cloak, a long, flowing overcoat. It's called a mantle. He takes that off. It's the symbol of his authority. He rolls it up; he strikes the water.

The water parts, and the two of them cross to the other side on dry ground. Then, there comes Elijah's ascension, preceded by the arrival of a fiery chariot.

It's all very dramatic and full of ancient images intended to evoke a sense of mysterious otherworldliness. On the one hand, the story seems as far away from us as the moon. And yet, in another way, the realities revealed in the story mirror the lives we live today. Some essential things never change.

The passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha was replicated in our midst a month ago when new Elders and Deacons came forward and hands were placed upon them, symbolizing the sacredness of the transfer of leadership in our faith tradition which is being entrusted to a new cohort, and sometimes a new generation. From generation to generation, the work of God goes on.

Many years ago hands were laid on me by a number of ministers who are no longer living, and today I chose to wear the stole I was given that day. I wear one each Sunday morning as a sign of my ordained office. The stole represents what Jesus referred to in Matthew's gospel when he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." But I also like to think that it

symbolizes Elijah's mantle. These rituals represent the bonds of tradition that hold the community of faith together across the ages.

Elisha says, "As the Lord lives and as you live, I am not going to leave you. Period. I am with you all the way." There is no more beautiful human posture than loyalty. But, as I am trying to say, there is more to their relationship than loyalty.

I don't know why Elijah keeps saying to the younger one, "Don't go any farther with me." No, but after awhile he realizes there is more at stake than loyalty, so he desists and they go on together.

It is then that Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. This is the mentoring moment in the text.

In ancient times there were occasions where the eldest son would inherit twice as much as the younger sons in a family (the daughters still received nothing). The point here is that Elisha is not asking for material property or for monetary gain. He wants the ability to serve God. Above all, he wants to not fail, and he is terrified because he has such huge shoes to fill. We all have known this kind of fear -- worrying whether we will measure up.

But as it has long been said, better to take a job that calls on you to "up your game" a little, than to take a job that you do so well already that you will begin coasting. How has your life stacked up when it comes to this kind of measuring rod?

You know, mentoring is more than teaching. It involves a sizeable investment in an individual. There is a sense of looking after a person, as Louis Leaky looked after Jane Goodall. It's about investing some of yourself in someone you deem worth the time and effort.

Again, it's about the willingness to give someone more than information, It's about giving some of your soul. Maybe exposing some of your soul to them, You do this by giving them entrée.

One leaves oneself open, in the process, to a kind of evaluation. You can't help it. You ask yourself, "Is what I have to offer - up to speed? Or is it hopelessly outdated."

Mentoring tests what you've learned, really learned, that is of value in your years of work and living. It is a measure of what one has accomplished, not in terms of product but in terms of honest outlay of self.

I was so pleased to hear the Portland Trailblazer's draft pick, Shaedon Sharpe, say that he was looking forward to learning a ton about being an NBA guard from Damian Lillard.

That's what being a successful rookie is all about. And maybe it will stir something vital and purpose-giving in Damian Lillard, too.

I mean, the mentee can give as much as the mentor, if not more.

I remember how my most important mentor arrived in my life as a total gift.

When I came out of seminary and began working at a church in NE Portland, I felt like Elisha. Very green. I ran out of preaching material after the fourth Sunday. Really! I'd said everything I knew to say. But help was on its way. A neighboring pastor called me, out of the blue. He was in his early fifties. He expressed an interest in getting acquainted and told me he would pick me up for breakfast the following Thursday morning. He didn't even ask if I wanted to go.

I confessed to being awfully green. And he helped me deal with several churchy problems that might have done me in had I not had a mature minister to talk these things over with.

After a few months I met his wife and I told her how important our weekly breakfast visits were to me. And then she told me how important I was to her husband who had done mission work in Ethiopia for most of his career and, as a result, had been out of the country for twenty-five years. He knew nothing of popular culture and little of what had happened in the United States for a quarter century, and it was showing in his preaching. God or fate or serendipity put us needy ones together like Elijah and Elisha. Remember those puzzle pieces?

As the whirlwind carries Elijah into heaven, Elisha grasps his own outer garment and tears it to pieces as a sign of his grief. Then he picks up the mantle of his beloved mentor and tries it on. First there is grief, then comes the embracing of a new future in the wake of the loss.

I remember a tender moment a few days after my father died. There was, among other things, my father's clothes to sort through. Most went to the Goodwill. But I asked my mother if I could have his one Pendleton shirt. Not because it was his best shirt. It wasn't. It had a couple of moth holes in it and it didn't fit me.

But I could see a number of his hairs were still on it. I held it to my face and it smelled like my dad. I've kept it with my own shirts every day since. For me, it is something like a mantle.

Here's one of the glories of human existence. Each one of us is unique. There is no one who has been like us or will ever be like us. There is something we are put on earth to do that only we can do. But here's the other glorious thing about human existence. . . .

We are a part of a larger story, a continuum of hope and faith, a continuum that began before we were born and will exist long after we are gone.

How does it move? From generation to generation.

The Sunday I was ordained in November of 1980 I asked an early mentor of mine, the Rev. Douglas Huneke, campus chaplain at the University of Oregon, to give me my charge as a pastor. Doug had brought the author Elie Wiesel to Oregon several times and I was deeply impressed with Wiesel's amazing heart and ethical imperatives in the shadow of the holocaust. In his memoir called, *Night* he says: "To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."

As part of my charge Rev. Huneke looked straight at me and said the following: "Scott, never say or do anything that does dishonor to the millions of children murdered by the Nazis in the holocaust."

You know, when the Roe decision was overturned on Friday, thousands of so-called Pro-Lifers took to the streets to celebrate. Many of them had long seen abortion as a modern version of the holocaust. Many of them felt and feel that justice has finally been done. It's important for us to understand this.

But let me add to this to that the ball is now in their court and some of them know it. Some of them know that they are on notice to finally demonstrate that they care about *born* children, not just the unborn.

Having been a pastor in Utah for ten of the last eleven years, I know many of these people. They know that how they choose to deal with questions like health care for women and children will be under new scrutiny. How they address funding education for poor children, and affordable childcare, and school lunch programs, and a host of other concerns is now thrown under new light. In this initial moment we need to hold these women and children up and not flag in doing so. Of course, we also need to get out the vote in November.

One more thing -- let me ask you, if you are concerned about the welfare of women and children in this country now that the right to healthcare for women is so tragically compromised, who have been your mentors and guides in giving you the conscience you carry?

Take a moment and think about that as we begin to try to find our footing in a post Roe world.

And finally, remember . . .

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Amen.