

## 2 Kings 2:9-14

<sup>9</sup>When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” <sup>10</sup>He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” <sup>11</sup>As they continued



walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup>Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

<sup>13</sup>He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. <sup>14</sup>He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

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### The Mantel of Faith

In today’s pericope, we encounter a story filled with the miraculous. There is a spectacular whirlwind, a fiery theophany, and a Moses-style parting of the Jordan River.

It’s easy to read the story and get swept away in the Hollywood-style special effects of our little passage this morning, but if we strip the text down to its core, it’s about something much more basic and ordinary: the relationship between teacher and student, mentor and apprentice, prophet and pupil.

Ignoring for a moment the astounding imagery of the text, it’s a simply story of Elijah and his understudy, Elisha, and the passing of the prophet’s calling from the former to the latter.

Their similar names mean “Yahweh is my God” and “My God is Salvation.” The two have journeyed together, the servant learning from his master, preparing for the day when he will be called to take over for his guide and friend.

In some ways, the text reads like a final exam of sorts. Elijah is constantly commanding Elisha to stay put. “You stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Bethel...to Jericho... to Jordan.”

Each time Elisha responds with the same stubbornness: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

I have long wondered about this strange, threefold routine. It’s obviously important to the story. I think it may be that Elijah is testing his student. It is a final examination.

In *Feasting on the Word*, one commentator writes: “To be Elijah’s heir, as it turns out, means far more than simply to do similar miracles; it is to go wherever the prophet goes, to bear the same burden, to risk the same hardship, to venture into times of both solitariness and solidarity in order to receive and ultimately bear a word of the Lord.”

This past week, I lost one of my mentors and teachers, my philosophy professor from Belhaven College, Wynn Kenyon. He died of a massive heart attack at the much too young age of 64.

If I had to name for you two people, outside of my own family, of course, who’d had a profound influence on my intellectual development, I’d have to say those two people would be Dr. Wynn Kenyon and Dr. Shirley Guthrie.

These two giants stand at opposite ends of the theological and Presbyterian spectrum. Guthrie, my theology professor in seminary, was a neo-orthodox Barthian with Liberationist and Feminist sympathies and a progressive outlook on religion, faith, and politics. He was a pillar in the PCUSA. Sadly, Dr. Guthrie passed away back in 2003.

Dr. Kenyon, on the other hand, was a stalwart in the Presbyterian Church in America. He was an evangelical conservative. There’s a famous ecclesiastical legal case for which bears his name. Back in 1975, he came before the Northern Branch of the Presbyterian Church and said that, as a matter of conscience, he could not participate in the ordination of women elders, though he would accept ordained women in leadership rolls. His case moved up to the highest court in the denomination, which ruled against his ordination. The ruling against him led to some high-profile departures from the denomination, including that of RC Sproul. It also made it clear that full acceptance of the calling of women to leadership in the church was necessary in serving the church as a pastor.

Kenyon went on to get his PhD and made his way to Belhaven as a professor of philosophy. He was an affable, friendly professor, more humble and fatherly than most professors.

I enjoyed playing the Devil’s advocate in his classes. Whatever position he took on any given subject, I was likely to take the opposite. He seemed to enjoy that, which is something I can’t say for most of my seminary professors. Dr. Kenyon seemed much more interesting in teaching his students how to think than simply what to think. He was

the first professor who'd introduced me to logic and reason as guides for understanding my faith. He also was the first to introduce me to ways of thinking far outside the Christian tradition, though he was always quick to dish up healthy portions of apologetics so as to keep us on the right path. He opened my mind to new ideas and new ways of thinking about the world around me. That I rarely agreed with his conclusions did not mean that I didn't agree with the basic epistemological methods he mapped for his students.

He encouraged us to approach intellectual problems with a sense of wonder, instead of doubt. As recently as Epiphany, I quoted him in my sermon, *Star of Wonder*.

Kenyon and Guthrie could have hardly found a theological area of agreement, but they were both very similar in many ways. They loved to draw diagrams on chalk boards in hopes of simplifying infinitely complex and baffling concepts. They were also both genuinely kind and compassionate professors who cared for their students. They were also both jokesters.

Dr. Kenyon was in the coffee shop one day when he realized that every time he approached the counter, the student who ran the shop would have to get up from her studies to man the counter. He thought it be funny to approach the counter, force the student to stand up, and then turn around and walk right out the door. One day the student decided she wasn't going to fall for it anymore, so she told him that she wasn't going to get up unless he really needed something. He promised her that this time his wasn't going to walk out that door. He was adamant in his promise. So she rose from her desk and took her post at the counter. Then watched in disbelief as her 60 year old college professor proceeded to get down on all four and crawl out the door!

Who couldn't love a professor like that!

While my two mentors may have been theological opposites, they would have had two or three areas of agreement.

They would have both agreed that Jesus is Lord. They both strongly and boldly affirmed the Lordship of Christ.

Secondly, they both would have agreed on the primacy of grace. We are saved not by our good deeds or own volitional powers, but by the love and grace of God alone.

Thirdly, they would have both affirmed that the Christian life is to be lived with high levels of integrity, honesty, love and grace. They both, in their personal lives, lived with such grace and love that you couldn't help but admire them. Neither of them was perfect mind you.

A friend of mine on campus was one of the first openly gay students at Belhaven. Some of the students in the dorm had left hatful, homophobic notes on his door.

One day my friend came to me and said, "You won't believe what Dr. Kenyon did."

I thought to myself, “Uh OH!”

But, this is what my friend had to say: “He came up to me and hugged me and told me that he loved me, that he was praying for me, and that if he could do anything for me just to let him know.”

It would have been easy for some to have painted Dr. Kenyon as a misogynistic, homophobic, anti-intellectual fundamentalist whose beliefs marginalized and excluded others, devalued them, and made them lesser human beings. But that would be a wholly unfair and totally inaccurate picture of Dr. Kenyon.

It would be easy for some to have painted old Dr. Guthrie as a liberal, socialist, do-gooder who threw out the Bible anytime it became inconvenient or difficult and thus opened the door wide for sin to enter the church. But that would be an equally unfair and inaccurate not picture of Dr. Guthrie.

As different as they were, they both carried the mantel of faith with integrity and love. They both believed in the Lordship of Christ and in the primacy of Grace.

This too is the mantel is that passed on to us, and to every generation of those seeking to follow Christ. We may disagree with one another and deeply so at times. We may choose to serve in different denominations and with different commitments to scripture and to faith.

But, no matter what, at the end of the day, it is the Lordship of Christ, the primacy of Grace, and the Calling of Discipleship that draw us together. We are called to love each other, to grieve with each other, to forgive each other.

Dr. Kenyon embraced that young student struggling through a difficult time, not because it was the rational thing to do, or because it was the ethical thing to do, or because it was the “approved” thing to do, but because it was the Christian thing to do.

Recently, my friend wrote the following letter to me:

I have for a long time believed that Dr. Kenyon was a key in restoring my faith. Like every other gay person I’ve met who had grown up seeking and searching what we all seek, I was seeking God's love. What we got was vitriol and judgment. Finally after enduring all of that we were shown the way to the door. That is what we got when we opened up. Most of us just took the hint and never came knocking again. I got Dr. Kenyon. His theology was probably not much different than those whom had shown me the door. I knew for some reason, although he could not agree with me, that he would not judge me and I was right. It was the compassion of Christ. It was love. That is what he believed was his only response. He was not there to judge. He knew what I could not yet believe and that was that God loved me. Then, during that time of my life when I felt so

alone, he invited to his home for dinner. There, it was not just love on paper. Something tangible and kind, and there I was with his family, and I felt loved. From there I had the strength to begin to seek a place for myself. Which led me to St James and to my pastor, Buddy Stallings. I find it ironic that both of these men so far apart in theology carried the same message of Christ's love. Doubly ironic that, in all my travels, I found both of these men in Jackson, Mississippi. I will think back on Dr. Kenyon and remember a man of compassion and of course I will remember his laugh!

The many saints in Christ that have gone on before us leave with us the mantel of faith. Let us not fail to pick up that mantel and carry on. We cannot simply repeat or parrot their words and their actions. We cannot be Dr. Kenyon or Dr. Guthrie any more than we can be Augustine or Origen, Kierkegaard or Hegel, Barth or Tillich.

We must carry the mantel of faith in our own time and in our own place, but like them, let us carry it with integrity and grace and love.

Amen