**The Passing of the Mantle**

**Text: 2 Kings 2:1-14**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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As the names of the saints reverberated through this space a few minutes ago, I’m sure we were naming some of our mentors.

We all need mentors. A mentor might be a school teacher, a coach, a social worker, a Sunday school teacher, an aunt, an uncle, a neighbor…any one of these roles, and many more. A mentor might be a parent, but not necessarily so. Mentors are often someone outside of our homes. After all, it takes a church, it takes a neighborhood, sometimes it takes a whole town to raise a child.

A mentor is a trusted advisor, a counselor, a wise person who freely shares his or her gifts with a protégée. As such, being a mentor is a form of stewardship. It’s an expression of generosity. Because, of course, stewardship and generosity have to do with more than how we allocate our financial resources. Stewardship and generosity have to do with how we allocate all of the gifts that God has entrusted to us. Being a mentor is one of the ways in which those gifts can be put to good use. It’s one of the ways in which one can grow one’s faith through generosity.

Elijah was Elisha’s mentor. Together they make their way through the annals of 1 Kings, as Elisha’s learns from his master the art of being a prophet: healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the poor, and bringing truth to power.

In today’s passage, early in 2 Kings, Elijah is taken-up into heaven, and Elisha takes his place as the leading prophet in Israel. It’s a tough moment for Elisha. He does not want to let his master go. It reminds me of the end of my junior year in high school. My mentors on the track team, Michael and Steven Sparks, were about to graduate. I’d been dreading the day for months. Like Elisha, I didn’t want to think about it. With their departure, the mantle of leadership would fall on me and several other newly minted seniors. It wasn’t a role that I relished.

We look-up to our mentors. But we sometimes doubt that we can live-up to the high standards that they’ve set for us. That was part of Elisha’s struggle. So he delayed, as long as possible, the moment when he would say good-bye. Elijah kept trying to lose him, and Elisha kept hanging on. It’s almost as if Elijah was saying, “Hey, dude, you’ve got this. Let me go.” But Elisha needed to be reassured that the spirit of Elijah was upon him. In fact, he wanted a double portion of that spirit! He had to catch the mantle – he had to catch that cloak of considerable power – that his mentor was passing to him.

Mentors are important. In a society where race or poverty or poor schools or broken homes or the combination of all of these factors can leave some young people at a *considerable* disadvantage, mentors are important. Especially when these factors are compounded over multiple generations. Being a mentor can strengthen your faith. Having a mentor can both strengthen your faith and expand your opportunities. As we celebrate the saints this day, we celebrate as well the ways in which the saints have been generous to us; generous with their gifts in the ministry of mentorship.

I want to tell you some stories about mentors this morning; stories about saints who were mentors.

Saints and mentors like Mary Herrick. Mary was a high school history teacher. She taught at DuSable High School on Chicago’s South Side. During those years racial discrimination in Chicago was so bad that most African-American families were forced to live in a narrow strip of land called the Black Belt. DuSable was one of the few high schools that African-American youth could attend. Some White folks defended this discrimination on the grounds that they had to keep their children away from the crime and the drugs and the family dysfunction in the Black Belt, but research showed that African-Americans who had recently arrived from the South were law-abiding folks living in strong families with little evidence of addiction. It was only after a generation or two, crammed into the substandard housing of the Black Belt, forced to go to schools that were inadequately funded and staffed, with limited employment opportunities due to discrimination in the work place; only after a generation or two of living in such conditions that the crime and the drug issues began to emerge.

This was the community – these were the social conditions – in which Mary Herrick chose to teach. She was a short little White woman, with a sweet face…but you didn’t mess with Miss Herrick! She had been blessed with a double portion of some kind of spirit of power. Like Jesus, she spoke with authority! And she was a strict disciplinarian. But, within those boundaries, she did amazing work. She taught her students. She mentored her students. She worked overtime with her students. When no one else would believe in them, she did. In the depths of the Depression, when Chicago public school teachers weren’t paid some weeks, Miss Herrick stuck to her post. She was a woman on a mission: bringing the good news of God’s love to the schools and the neighborhoods of the South Side. It wasn’t just in the classroom that she mentored her students. She was active in the community after hours and on the weekends as well. There were a lot of Sundays when she wasn’t in church because, as she explained decades later, she didn’t have time to listen to the preacher talk about doing good things. She was too busy *doing* them!

One of Mary Herrick’s students was a promising young man named Harold Washington. He went on to become Chicago’s first Black mayor. And he credited Miss Herrick with being a big factor in his success. Mary Herrick was his mentor. Mary Herrick was a saint. She passed the mantle of service.

When Miss Herrick was approaching retirement, she found herself in church more often. Singing in the choir of that same church on the South Side was a social worker named John Ramey. John worked with gang members. He mentored young men. John was the Executive Director of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club: one of the many settlement houses and community centers that once served the neighborhoods of this nation; something like the Boys and Girls Club that continues to be a blessing to the children and youth of Bedford today. Young women and men were mentored in these facilities. Young women and men were shown that they had options for success. They were encouraged to dream and to strive and to take risks and to go for it! They didn’t have to settle for a life of drugs and crime and victimhood and dependency. It often takes a mentor to come alongside you and show you that you have these options. It often takes a mentor to convince you that you have what it takes to be successful. Sometimes we blame people who languish in generational poverty and fall into addiction and homelessness; we blame them as if it’s all their fault. But it’s not. Maybe they made some bad decisions along the way, but maybe no one ever came alongside them to show them a better way.

John Ramey mentored young men. One day John was sitting in his office when one of his gang members came in. “Mr. Ramey,” he said, “I want to marry my girl so bad. But I got no money. She said she won’t marry me if I got no money. So I got me a gun. I’m going to rob somebody so that I can get me some money and marry my girl.”

John said, “Why do you want to do that? Why do you want to ruin your life? You don’t need a gun. What you need is a job. Tell you what: give me your gun and I promise you I’ll get you a job by tomorrow morning.”

So the young man gave John his gun. Which John put in the safe. John had a lot of guns in that safe. Every once and a while John had to empty the safe. In the dead of night he’d dump the guns in the Chicago River! John put the gun in the safe and then he got on the phone. Called a friend at the Chicago Park District. He said, “Bill, I have to find a job for this young man by tomorrow morning. You got anything?”

Bill did have an opening, for someone to pick-up trash in the parks. He said, “Have the man in my office by 9 am tomorrow and I’ll see what I can do.”

Next morning John drove the young man to the Park District office, and he was hired. 25 years later, John bumped into the now middle-aged man at a community event. He was still working for the Park District; in a much better job. And he thanked John profusely for creating that possibility for him.

John Ramey was his mentor. John Ramey was a saint. He passed the mantle of service.

John’s wife, Carol Ramey, was my Junior Choir Director. Even as a little kid, I loved to sing. I’d just rear back and belt out those hymns as loud as my little 5-year-old lungs would allow. But, unbeknownst to me, I couldn’t carry a tune. This wasn’t a problem until 2nd grade, when Mrs. Ramey started the Junior Choir. You can imagine her horror as she tried to direct the first rehearsal and here’s this leather-lunged little kid belting out a non-existent tune. As soon as the rehearsal ended she called another melodically-challenged little boy and me up to the piano. And she patiently played notes on the piano until we were able to match the pitch. I will always be grateful to Carol Ramey for teaching me how to sing.

One day she taught us a new Christmas carol. She said, “This has such a beautiful tune that people often cry when they hear it.”

I thought, “That’s silly! Why would you cry just because you hear a niece piece of music?” With all of my 8-year-old wisdom, that’s what I thought. Now, every time I sing *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, with tear-filled eyes, I think of Carol Ramey. She was a saint. She was one of my mentors. She passed to me and to many others the mantle of service.

“I sing a song of the saints of God: patient and brave and true. Who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.”

Maybe you know the hymn. It’s another one that Mrs. Ramey taught us. I’d sing it for you but I’m afraid I might cry. Here’s the last verse:

They lived not only in ages past;   
there are hundreds of thousands still.   
The world is bright with the joyous saints   
who love to do Jesus' will.   
You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store,   
in church, by the sea, in the house next door;   
they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,   
and I mean to be one too.

Amen.