

“Wardrobe Change”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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2 Kings 1:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62

I hope I do not jinx my family by saying this, but we are finally in the end stages of unpacking as we have settled into our new home in Leonia. We had more boxes than we knew what to do with, and a month too late for the Asian Ministry Garage Sale. But as I have sifted through boxes, I have also discovered treasures.

There is one box I opened and it smelled of my mom. When she died 3 years ago, far too suddenly, I incorporated a number of her clothes into my wardrobe. Just a couple of dresses I never washed, and they still smell like her: her laundry detergent, her perfume, her scented lotions. I open the box and can still smell traces of her. These outfits ended up in their own little corner of my closet-- the faint smell evokes something so powerful I cannot bear it as a daily reminder, but I know I can seek it out when I need it. Other outfits-- the ones that fit me pretty well-- I have already incorporated into my wardrobe. These are reminders I like to have. As I feel the fabric close to my skin and bring it to life, I feel a gratitude for the life my mom gave me, the immense love she showed me, and the struggles she endured to do her best by my sister and me. I think about what strengths of hers I have incorporated into my role as a working woman and a mother. And I see weaknesses in myself that are glaring to me because I first noticed them in my mom. However, there are also lessons she wanted to overcome but couldn't, that by God's grace and her own gentle nudging I believe I have been able to grasp.

When Elisha took up the mantle, or cloak, that the prophet Elijah, his spiritual mentor, had left behind when Elijah had ascended in a whirlwind into heaven, he was despondent, tearing his own cloak into two. Before Elijah had departed him, Elisha had told Elijah three times that he would never leave Elijah's side. When Elijah made it clear that he must move on, Elisha begged Elijah, "Give me a double portion of your spirit!" When Elisha finally took on Elijah's mantle or cloak, I know he must have been terrified, uncertain of whether he could really handle the power of being on his own before God-- much as I was terrified to be a new mother without a mom there to coach me.

But when Elisha grasped his departed mentor's cloak and struck the water with it, an amazing thing happened. The waters of the Jordan parted, and he crossed. In that

simple action, Elisha carries the power of Moses, who also parted the waters of the Red Sea that led the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt into freedom. Elisha also carries the power of Joshua, who led the 12 tribes of Israel to cross the flooded river Jordan on dry ground, from the wilderness into the promised land. Finally, Elisha carries the power of his mentor Elijah, who had just performed the same miracle before his ascension. And of course, in the power of Elisha, Elijah, Jacob, and Moses, the power of God is at work. Nobody stands alone.

In our household, the power of earlier generations looms large. My wife is the daughter of immigrants, and it is a common mantra when our daughter complains about not having something she wants, that my wife tells her, "You should be glad for what you had; your Lola grew up in a one-room home with a dirt floor with 5 other siblings." This has taken on a mythology of its own as Chris realizes how predictable her mantra is, and she has started to have fun with it saying things like "your Lola didn't have Barbies; she had to name her toenail clippings and play with them." But as any child of an immigrant knows, there is a certain sense of duty to honor the effort and sacrifices your parents' and grandparents' generations made. You want to wear the mantle of your ancestors in a way that would make them proud. You want to make complete the work they have begun.

While my ancestors go back in America as far as record can count, I too have this desire to honor those who have gone before-- particularly my mom. Since she was a single mom, I watched how much she struggled to parent and provide for us well. So in college, when I came to understand myself as lesbian, I was very reluctant to tell her. I know that in her love, she wanted the best for me; I was afraid that being gay was not in her categories of "best." I put off telling her for another 4 years! However, it came to the point that I dreaded spending time with her doing the things we had always enjoyed. Because I had cut off a part of myself to her, I struggled to find anything meaningful to talk to her about. I finally-- carefully and caringly, told her one afternoon as we walked through a park she had brought me to as a child. We sat, and she asked questions, I gave answers, and she assured me of her love for me. While we spoke, several hot-air balloons in a field below filled with air and took off. All that time I had worried about protecting her feelings, and instead she showed a strength in her unconditional love for me as she mothered me. It was a holy and memorable moment.

Jesus challenged those who would follow him to leave behind the ties that make human life rich. To those who said, "Let me first bury my father," Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." To those who said, "I will follow you, but let me first say farewell to those at my home," Jesus said "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of

God.”” How can this break from family honor a tradition that stands in the shadows of forefathers Elisha, Elijah, Joshua and Moses?

In a sense, that was my question as a first-year college student as I finally confronted within myself the realization that I was gay. As I mentioned, I feared hurting my family as I disappointed their expectations of me. At the same time I came to know myself as gay, I also came to sense a call to the ministry in the church that had nurtured my faith. At that point in time, it seemed that I would have to choose between answering my call serve the church I loved, and the chance to live in meaningful relationship with someone I love. It seemed an impossible split. How could I choose? Finally, I had known from the time I was a child that I wanted to one day become a mother. At that point in my life, I had no role models, no blueprints for how this could possibly happen. There was no Elijah to show me the way. 19 years old and afraid, I spent many days curled up in my college dorm papasan chair as I grappled with my fears and uncertainty. In that darkness, a small, but steady sense grew within me. I came to know it as the voice of God. What it told me was “Follow me. Do not be afraid; just follow and I will lead. You can trust me.” And so I did. It was perhaps the greatest leap of faith I have ever taken, but God did not fail me. And somehow, each fear I had worked itself out. I found that living for who God was calling me to be instead of living for what I perceived my parents wanted from me actually led me into deeper and more meaningful relationship with my parents. I found that living for who God was calling me to be instead of what the Presbyterian polity determined I should be led me into a more integrated spirituality and authentic ministry. I found that living for who God was calling me to be instead of the blueprints society had provided for me led me to create a family more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

I have spent way too much of this sermon talking about myself; I won't do that in most sermons. But in the case of this scripture, that is the most authentic witness I can provide. Only you can determine how Jesus speaks to you specifically and says “Come, follow me.” Only you can determine what and who must be left behind in order to follow. Only you can decide what pieces of clothing should be left behind and which ones you will proudly wear. But I tell you what: in this community of church, we can step back and show one another the wardrobe changes we have made as we sort through how the old wardrobe of our foremothers and fathers blend with the new clothes we wear as we step into Jesus' calling. We admire one another and the choices that have been made and declare: *You look fabulous.* Amen.

As we remember what our forebears have brought into our lives and into the church, we remember particularly those who struggled for LGBT equality. We remember the

courage of those who rioted after the police raids of the Stonewall Inn. We remember parents who knew enough of God's love that they were able to offer that to their own gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children. We remember the witness of people of faith who insisted on the welcome of LGBT people-- some of whom did not live to see the day the Presbyterian Church (USA) could welcome all whom God calls to ministry. And we remember people too young to be called foremothers and forefathers, those killed this month in Orlando.