

“Learning to Walk & Talk” 2 Kings 12: 1-2, 6-14 Rev. Janet Chapman 2/14/21

On this Valentine’s Day on a Sunday, I cannot resist highlighting some thoughts children have on love and romance. You can say I miss having a young child’s viewpoint in my life but there is a reason shows like “Kids Say the Darndest Things” and “America’s Funniest Videos” featuring kids in unrehearsed scenarios are always a hit. When asked how people in love typically behave, 10 yr. old Arnold answered, “Mooshy... like puppy dogs... except puppy dogs don’t wag their tails as much” (think about that for a moment). Dave, also 8, said, “Love will find you even if you’re trying to hide from it. I’ve been trying to hide from it since I was five, but the girls keep finding me.” When asked their thoughts on kissing, Wendy, age 8, said that “when a person gets kissed for the first time, they fall down and don’t get up for at least an hour.” Seven year old Brian admitted, “You learn it right there on the spot when the gooshy feelings get the best of you,” whereas Billy, age 6, added, “I look at it like this: Kissing is fine if you like it, but it’s a free country and nobody should be forced to do it” (a politician in the making!).

This day in American society has grown to be a marketing success by Kansas City-based Hallmark, who incidentally is grieving over that embarrassing Super Bowl game (don’t get me started.) It was as early as the 15th century that February 14th came to be honored as a day of romance but recently, I have come to appreciate the more expansive view it has taken on in celebrating those non-romantic relationships, including with friends and colleagues. It is a good reminder to tell someone they are loved, they are appreciated, something we don’t hear enough of. As today’s calendar intersects with today’s assigned scripture, which was determined decades ago as a part of what is called the lectionary, I am drawn to the

relationship that existed between the prophet Elijah, a rather odd character, and his student, Elisha. It is a story of passing the torch from one prophet to the next which portrays the strong bond and surprising intimacy that existed between them. Elijah is known as a hero in the First Testament, also known as the Old Testament. The prophet Elijah could discern God's voice in the delicate sound of silent stillness, rather than in the pounding of thunder and earthquakes like Moses. He faithfully served God despite the dangers it posed and performed many miracles. Gospel stories point to him when describing both John and Jesus. Elijah even served as a figure of hope for African American slaves who longed for freedom as they sang out, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, comin' for to carry me home." He attained the status of father of all the prophets, yet the narrator glosses over some of his career achievements in order to spend time on the long goodbye between Elijah and Elisha, as Elisha fights that final farewell.

It is a long walk that these two take together, in the final days, as they journey from one region to the next. Elijah is trying to slip away, to be alone when God takes him home, but Elisha flat-out refuses to be left behind. They share in a "holy friendship," a "God-centered friendship," similar to what Jesus does with his followers saying, "I have called you friends," in the Gospel of John. The bond is deep and the act of walking is significant to the relationship, just like some of us enjoy walking and chatting with friends on a bright sunny day. But it is more than that – walking becomes central to the text. In Hebrew, the word "walk" is used in relation to Elijah & Elisha three times. The route from Gilgal to Bethel is about 10 miles and from Bethel back to the Jordan is another 10 miles. After crossing the Jordan, the pair kept on walking and talking. This walking is a form of teaching similar to Aristotle's school in ancient Greece whose name was derived from the Greek verb "to walk around." As disciples walked

with their teacher, they engaged in intense conversations whereby their perspectives, beliefs, and reasoning would be developed and clarified. This is not aimless but intentional walking, similar to walking the path of the labyrinth which we hope to be able to do someday right here on our own property. Walking on the path or the Way became a common reference to those who followed in Jesus' footsteps. Jesus was called the Way and followers were called people of the Way, who learned to see life as a journey to be walked, even when the destination or future seemed unclear. As it is referred to in this text, to walk and talk with mentors was to learn and be taken under their wing being brought closer to God and an awareness of God in their lives.

As an aside note, I am aware that walking and talking are not as easy for me as they used to be, especially being masked. I find that I can't see my feet or the floor, therefore, I have taken some serious tumbles over the past 9 months. The first happened as I was talking with Patrice and Kim at Memorial Garden and resulted in a broken wrist requiring surgery and a metal plate. The others weren't as serious but still aggravating such as when I tripped coming into my house while talking on the phone. Then there was the misstep while laughing with Marge and Bonnie in the sanctuary insisting I could carry the ladder just fine. I am convinced someone added that 3rd step on the altar just to mess with me. Then last Sunday, I was cashing out at the 99cent store, chatting with the cashier and thanking her for her hard work, when I tripped over a full basket of groceries left on the floor by another staff person at the next register. I was so surprised by its presence I just went straight down. The common denominator in them all – talking and walking at the same time!

I look at it now as a firm reminder that there are some bumps and bruises which go along with learning a new skill, which mask-wearing has revealed. Elisha is learning a new skill

and he stumbles more than a few times. After Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind and the firey chariot, Elisha is on his way to Bethel where he has business to attend to. He pauses near a campground for a bit of shade, mopping his bald scalp with his prayer shawl when some kids surround him and start taunting him. They call him names and make fun of his bald head until he has had enough. He mutters a few words and within a few seconds a couple bears charge out from the trees and maul some of the slower members of the group rather badly. Frederick Buechner writes that it is not the most edifying story about Elisha, but it may be one of the more endearing, as we see that God does not call everyone to be Mister Rogers. Not to mention, there is no need to try making a fool out of a prophet because sooner or later, he will probably make a fool out of himself. Not even the greatest of prophets are perfect. Elisha does try hard to rise above his primal urges and it is his resolve that keeps him on the heels of his mentor right up to the very end, learning and grasping and watching and waiting. After three separate times insisting, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you," Elisha finally opens up about his ultimate wish: "Let a double share of your spirit come to me," he says. It is like saying, "I want to be devoted to God, as fully as you are, a person whose whole life is shaped and guided by faith. I have been your disciple; now, my father, give me your legacy. Share with me the spirit of God that I see in you, doubly so if possible." It is a bold request and the great Elijah isn't sure if he can grant it, leaving that decision up to God. God provides what is needed and as Elijah's coat, his mantle, falls from the firey chariot, Elisha picks it up and strikes the waters of Jordan just as his mentor did, saying, "Where is the God of Elijah?" and the waters are parted. It is a confirmation that what the teacher has taught the student is enough and now it is up to Elisha to carry on the legacy.

As I look back on my faith journey, my learning to walk the talk and talk the walk, I am grateful for such mentors who have taught me along the way. I'm thankful for people who have believed in me, people who have corrected me, people who have nurtured and taught me, who saw me, really saw me...the gifts I had and didn't have, but needed. They chose to be in relationship with me, to develop a holy friendship, to sacrifice their time and resources for my benefit; they prodded me to do what I didn't want to do, what was hard to do, in order to achieve what I had always wanted to do. I wonder if you have had someone like that? I wonder if you have been called to be in holy friendship with someone else? Who in your lifetime have you had to say a painful, frightening goodbye to and whose mantle have you had to pick up and carry? Where will this journey take you now? Rest assured, our story tells us we do not go alone for the God of Elijah is with you. A double portion of the Holy Spirit is being passed on to you, beloved friends, which will fill you and empower you to do great things, to do justice and to love mercy and to walk and talk humbly with your God. Thanks be to God.