

Accepting all that God offers.

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:22-25

What does it mean to *live by the Spirit*? Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, states that if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Paul then shares with the Galatians, and by extension, with us, that when we live and are guided by the Spirit, what will happen and be produced are the fruits of the spirit. Which he listed as love, joy, peace and patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That is the fruit that is produced when we, as the faithful people, are guided by the Spirit and live out our faith as God has intended. I'm not saying you have to do all of that at once. We all have different gifts; we all have different approaches; we all have areas that we can work on and grow in. And so I hope that within that list of the Spirit, you see this as a lifelong journey: one where we are continuing to work on each of these pieces of the Spirit, so we can live as God has intended us to.

We heard today in the words of the Sacrament of Baptism that in the United Church of Canada, we believe that God calls *all* followers of Jesus Christ into the ministry. We are all called to embody God's love in this world and amongst each other. This requires every single believer. It's not good enough to simply rely on a leader. Every single one of us is called and needs to be part of this work.

Accepting all that God offers us isn't always easy. Living a life of faith means at times that we will be challenged and we will challenge others. It requires discipline and sacrifice. *And* it also comes with affirmation, acceptance, belonging and unconditional love that is always there for us. The story of Elijah and Elisha is a story of a mentorship, a friendship, and their faith. The loyalty that Elisha demonstrates is inspiring, and I think provides us all with hope. Elijah, for those of you who haven't heard the name, is a prophet. Elijah is a prophet who is nearing the end of his life and is going to be taken by God. Elisha is Elijah's protégé. Elijah is portrayed in this particular story as a new Moses who has been chosen by God to call the people of Israel back

into their traditions and faithfulness. Elijah has invited Elisha to follow him and become a servant of God.

Elisha's faith, though, is then tested. Tested by Elijah who not once, not twice, but three times encourages Elisha to stay behind. That is not what Elisha did. Instead, Elisha insists on going wherever Elijah goes. It's quite understandable why Elisha would refuse to leave Elijah's side. It can be very sad and difficult to let go of people we admire. People that we respect. People who have taught us and helped us to become who we are meant to be. Elisha wants to live up to his mentor's expectations. So when Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he leaves, Elisha boldly asks for the following: "Please let me inherit a double-share of your spirit." Elijah very wisely responds by saying: "You have asked a very hard thing. Yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted to you, and if not, it will not." When we receive and live by the Spirit, we are being called to shift our thinking and our way of living from being self-centered to being God-centered. Elisha is being called to discern what God's will is for him.

Many of us have heard the warning that we need to discern who are true prophets and who are false prophets. Prophets in the Bible are often known for challenging people, nations, communities, and people's actions. They are known for proclaiming what communities have done wrong, while calling people at the same time to live by the Spirit: with love, patience, generosity...etc. And prophets are often, after doing this, persecuted for their words and have at times lost their lives. When Elisha picks up that mantle – you can imagine a cloak – he is accepting not only the cloak of his mentor, but the authority that comes with it. The call that comes with it.

There is a cost to discipleship and following our faith. Think about it: how do we live by the spirit of gentleness, peace and love when we are faced with somebody who has hurt us, who has upset us, who disagrees with us, and doesn't see the point in what we are passionate about? How do we find a way to love even when we are not feeling all that generous towards each other?

In the weekly e-news, I often write a reflection, and for the last two weeks I have been sharing prayers that I think can help us acknowledge different biases that we each have, that can then also direct and affect our choice in life. The third prayer is called the Community Bias Prayer. A community bias is when we find it difficult to see something that your group doesn't want to see.

Often a prophet sees something in a community that the people themselves do not want to see. God is the one that calls this person to find the courage and share that news. So I want to share this prayer with you in hopes that it will help us all to find a way to move past community bias. It says:

“Inspirer of holy boldness and humble bravery, give me the humility to learn from my community, along with the courage to differ graciously from my community. Seeking truth, even when my companions are unwilling to see it or accept it. Help me remain humbly loyal to truth, even when I am misjudged or rejected by my community by doing so. This we pray: amen.”

When we follow Jesus, when we live the Gospel message, we will come to understand that it comes with a cost. We will, like Elisha who followed Elijah, will be asked to follow Jesus. But will we do it no matter what? Will we leave behind our families to do what we are called to do? Will we, like Elisha, take time to discern whose voice we are listening to: is it our own inner voice or the voice of God? It should be noted that Elisha didn't actually listen to his mentor Elijah. Elijah told him three times to stay back, to not go. But instead, Elisha listened to the call of God, not his mentor, and he continued to follow. He felt compelled by God to follow.

How did Elisha find the strength to do this? We hear it in the response that Elijah was given each time, when Elisha said: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will never leave you.” Elisha trusted in the promise that *we are not alone*, which we proclaimed in our Statement of Faith today. Elisha trusted that God is always with us. There is an acknowledgement in that statement: “As the Lord lives, as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” The affirmation is that God loves us no matter what and will care for us no matter what we face. God will provide us with courage.

We also collectively today proclaimed that we will continue to support one another. That we will walk with each other, nurture each other's faith and uphold one another in prayer and encourage each other to live mission and ministry in this world. So I ask you today: who has been your mentor, and who will *you* mentor in our faith journey together? What is God calling you to share with others? What is God calling all of us to hear, listen, embrace so that we can move forward? How will the choices that we make produce the fruits of the spirit in the world, so when one

person is being judgemental or hurtful in their actions or words, how will we graciously and lovingly respond? How will we find a way to forgive, to reconcile and make new as Jesus has called us to do? And how will we hold fast to what is true without allowing our own individual biases to change that? We do this by focussing our lives on the call. By becoming God-centered, listening for God's voice that comes through each and every person here.

I pray that you will listen carefully for the Spirit to guide you. May you remain humbly loyal to the truth, even when others may not see things as you do. May you remember to always be open to learning from each other and listening without bias. May we all answer the call to follow Jesus knowing that we are not alone. May we trust in God and live in the Spirit, and be open to accepting the Spirit that has been freely given. Knowing that we're in this together. No one person does this alone. We do it with one another, with God and the Spirit guiding us. So go into this world and spread the fruits of the spirit, and may we all rejoice and be glad in that. Amen.