

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
July 14 2024 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 20
2 Kings 1-12**

Sermon: Turning the Corner 2: Leadership

Here's a story from one of my previous experiences in transitional ministry. It was actually the day of my interview, and I got there early, so I was waiting to meet with the interview team. They greeted me initially when I arrived and then asked me to wait in the foyer until they were ready to call me in. Unfortunately said foyer was right outside the present minister's office. His door was open. And he had a very loud voice.

As much as I tried not to listen, I could tell that the minister was going down a long telephone list, contacting everyone in the congregation and asking them to either buy tickets or to help cook and serve at the upcoming Mothers' Day luncheon. It was the same thing over and over again: "Hi Marcus, it's your minister calling. I am just checking to see if you already have your tickets for the Mother's Day lunch. You don't? Well, I hope you're planning to come – you know we're having quiche and salad..."

In the 20 minutes I waited, I must have heard the same thing at least a dozen times. I pretty much knew the menu by heart, as well as all the jobs he was looking for volunteers to fill. And I thought to myself: "Is that what they expect from a minister? Cause I am not going to fill those shoes..."

Another time I attended my first Council meeting with a congregation, and I had in hand a copy of last year's calendar from September to December. There were a lot of activities that they did – some were in the church, others in the wider community.

So I went down the list: "Should there be a Harvest supper?"

Oh yes, everyone agreed it was a great fundraiser. "Who is going to organize it?" Nobody spoke up. No hands went up. It used to be the minister's wife... One great thing about being a transitional minister, however, is that you can be very blunt. So I said "If no one is willing to organize it – let's cancel it this year, and see if anyone misses it."

Then I moved on to the next thing "How about making sandwiches for the soup kitchen? Any volunteers?" A couple hands went up – so I could see there was some commitment there – soup kitchen was a go. "Blessing of the Pets – I am happy to bless animals, but who is willing to book the space at the park, and do the advertising?" No volunteers – and by this time they had figured out the pattern, so they clearly didn't have enough investment to make it happen.

"Bible study?" enough hands to make it worthwhile. "Remembrance Day event?" can't we just observe in church?. "Christmas Pageant?" I asked. Twenty hands went up! Lots of investment there.

It took some time, but eventually the congregation remembered that **this was their** ministry. Not just the ministry of the paid personnel. They had loved the energy, the enthusiasm, and the creativity of their leaders, but most of the congregation were quite happy to follow along, instead of being leaders themselves or being partners within the ministry in that place.

And there were some good and talented leaders there. But they were taking a break – or they didn't feel needed – or they weren't 100 percent supportive, so they had just backed away for a while.

When I demonstrated that I was not going to do their ministry FOR them, many of them perked up again and remembered they could be leaders, too.

The second task of interim or transitional ministry is leadership. "Right" you say "we have to find the right minister or ministry team to lead us." Yes, that's important, but not really what I want to talk about today.

The leadership you need is already here.

I know, it's summer and there are a lot of people away. But the fact remains, the leadership you need is already here. And once you realize that fact, you will be the kind of place that any minister wants to serve.

The scripture reading Karin read for us today is the strange story of the late great prophet, Elijah, who was a prophet famous for his miracles and his truth-telling and, yes, the blunt questions he asked kings and leaders. But Elijah's time was almost up – the bible doesn't say that he was aging or crochety or starting to lose it, just that it was time, and everyone seemed to know it.

Elijah had a disciple named Elisha – this was a young man whom God told Elijah to anoint as his successor. But, even with that very auspicious beginning, we don't hear much about Elisha until the day that Elijah is taken from earth. (And I'm not using a metaphor for death there – Elijah was literally taken from earth to heaven without dying.)

As the story of that day unfolds, nobody really seemed to believe that Elisha was ever going to fill Elijah's shoes. Elijah had his doubts, the community of prophets scoffed at the idea, and probably even Elisha himself wondered why God had chosen him. But Elisha refused to give up. When Elijah told him – "stay here" or "stand back" or "you don't need to be here." Elisha just kept stepping up instead.

When the local prophets said to Elisha "Don't you know Elijah is going away today – you shouldn't stand so close." But Elisha said "Mind your own business."

The story is full of repetition: Three times Elijah tells Elisha to back off – but Elisha sticks like Velcro. Three times the local prophets tell Elisha what is going to happen, and again Elisha tells them to be quiet. Three times Elisha swears he will not leave Elijah until the journey is over. From Bethel to Jericho to Jordan – Elisha just keeps stepping up.

Now keep in mind, Elisha's whole background was farming, not prophecy or spiritual leadership. His resume said he drove the 12th pair of oxen on his father's farm – the end of the line so to speak. He didn't even come from the same tribe as Elijah. How could he be a prophet?

But when Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle, he soon discovered that he did have Elijah's knack for prophecy and truth telling and political activism. It's just that Elisha wasn't discouraged the first time that he failed to win people's confidence, or the second time, or the third time. He kept learning and growing and stepping up.

Sometimes people will say that the famous last words of the church are "we've always done it that way." But I think even more worse words are "we tried that once and it didn't work."

Leadership is about having the courage to get something really really wrong at times, and then to brush off the failure and try again. To learn from our mistakes: to figure out what did work, and what didn't work and then to build on it.

In the Indigenous Ministry council of our church, they don't have Executive Secretaries and Department heads, which all sounds very managerial. They have Vision Keepers. They understand that the role of leadership is to shape the community of faith along the lines of the vision they have agreed to. The apostle Paul did this in the early church. Elijah and Elisha did this in the Judean kingdom. They all called the people of God back to the Vision that first claimed them.

In the United Church, we have pretty flimsy distinctions between the paid trained accountable ministers and the lay leadership of our churches. As ordered ministers, we are told that we are "set aside" because of our training and because of the church's support for our candidacy – but that does not mean we sit in ivory towers or don't get our hands dirty from time to time. Having a minister who is "set aside" also does not mean they should fly solo – that they have some magical ability to bring a vision to the congregation, who can then sit back and wait for the fireworks.

It has very little to do with the university degrees we've completed or the certificates we've acquired. Because the most successful church is not one that attracts perfect ministers or perfect lay leaders, but the one that helps both ministers and lay leaders grow into their role, according to the vision of their ministry.

As leaders we work together.

There are programs and projects that Steve and I have led in your midst – some of them may fall away if no one else is willing to lead them. There are even more activities and ministries that have always been lay-led at RPUC, and that will continue to be fulfilled without our leadership.

So the question remains: What is the vision of the congregation that you want your leaders to hold up for you? Is it still the vision statement that we wrote when we became

an affirming ministry back in 2019? Are you ready to hear the blunt questions and the truth-telling of a prophetic voice, when our vision keepers need to use it?

Last week the metaphor for persistence I used was dancing. This week it is stepping up – making mistakes and learning from them. All the while building up the body of Christ with the kind of vision that the whole people of God are excited to join.
Thanks be to God.