Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

November 11, 2018

Neal MacPherson

THE CONVERSATION BEGINS 2 Kings 2:1–15

 Psalm 90:1–6, 12–17

 Ephesians 3:14–21

 John 13:1, 33–36; 14:1–3, 19–21; 25–27

 Today, a conversation begins. The conversation we will be having has to do with the challenges and opportunities that come our way when we enter the latter years of our lives. The conversation is multi-faceted. For those of us who are older, it is a conversation we will be having with ourselves and hopefully with our children. For those of us who are younger, it is also a conversation we will be having with ourselves and also with our parents. And for all of us it is a conversation we will be having with one another and with Jeannette Koijane and Hope Young from Kōkua Mau who will be facilitating our conversation. We do hope that all of you, both younger and older, will be able to participate in the sessions this Sunday and next following worship. They will take place in Kosasa Hall.

 We are a community rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and so it is helpful for us to begin our conversation from the perspective of our faith. The scripture readings for this morning’s worship have been chosen specifically with this in mind.

The words of the 90th Psalm set the stage for our conversation. The Psalm reminds us that a thousand years in the sight of God are like yesterday when it is past or like a watch in the night. We are as the grass of the field that in the morning is renewed and flourishes, and in the evening fades and withers. Such is the life of a human being. The shortness of life is not something we should avoid, but rather is something that should teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart. As we enter the final years of our lives, we could do no better than this.

This morning, by way of this sermon, I thought it would be helpful to explore narratives that describe what happens just before the deaths of Elijah the prophet and Jesus himself. What can we learn from these narratives? The first from the Second Book of Kings describes the relationship between Elijah and Elisha just before Elijah’s death. Notice how Elisha, the younger prophet, refuses to leave the side of the older prophet Elijah. Both Elisha and Elijah know that Elijah is going to die. Elijah keeps asking Elisha to leave him alone, but Elisha refuses. Wherever Elijah goes, whether to Bethel, or Jericho, or the Jordan, Elisha goes with him.

This is the task of the young. They are called to accompany their elders as they journey towards the completion of their lives. This is the responsibility children have towards their parents. But the arena is broader than that. What if an elder has no children? What if someone who is younger no longer has living parents? This is where the community of faith is so very important. In the community of faith, we are all children, parents, young and old, one to another. We are called to care for each other. Remember that Elisha is not Elijah’s son according to birth. But he is Elijah’s son in unity of the spirit.

And what responsibility do elders bear towards their children and to all who are younger? Taking Elijah as an example, might we not say that the responsibility of the elder is to face the completion of his or her life with grace and courage? Let us recall the question Elijah asked Elisha: “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah’s spirit, which he does indeed receive. If those of us who are older were to ask those who are younger what we might do for them before our lives come to completion, the younger folk might well say: “The best gift you can give us is for you to live your lives as fully and completely and gracefully and courageously as you are able, for in doing so we will be able to let you go more easily, and besides, if you live your lives fully and completely, you will be teach us how to live our own lives and face our deaths when we grow older.”

This all takes careful, self-conscious reflection, and that is the reason we are beginning the conversation today.

Let us also consider the example of Jesus himself. In the Gospel of John, as Jesus approaches the end of his life, he turns his attention towards the wellbeing of his disciples. He is concerned for them. How will they do without him? I am captured by this portrayal of Jesus. His humanity shines through his words. Like any parents who worry about their children when death approaches, Jesus worries about his disciples. How indeed will they manage? We think of all those death scenes from the movies. The dying father or mother gathers his or her children together, and says to them: “In my absence, I want you to continue to love one another and care for each other.” To his disciples, Jesus says:

“Little children, I am with you only a little

longer. You will look for me, and as I said

to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I

am going you cannot come.’ I give you a new

commandment, that you love one another. Just as

I have loved you, you also should love one

another. By this everyone will know that you are

my disciples, if you have love for one another.“

 —John 13:31–33

But there’s more. Jesus not only requests his disciples to love one another after he is gone, but he also makes promises to them. He lets them know what he will do *for them.* Yes, he needs to go in order to prepare a place for them. But he will not leave them orphaned. He will send the Spirit to them to be for them both a comforter and a guide. He then bestows upon them the gift of peace.

Like Elijah before him, Jesus grants to his disciples an example of how to die. Jesus dies with courage and unafraid. He has lived his life fully; now he dies giving his disciples the same assurance Julian of Norwich will give centuries later: “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

Love lies at the very center of the Christian understanding of the purpose of life. What is important is the love of Christ for us, and the ways in which we are to love one another. That love we are to have for one another is embodied in the ways in which we elders can help our children who will one day need to live without us, and the ways in which we who are younger can support our elders in their end-of-life journeys. It all has to do with love, which leads me to remind us of that beautiful passage in the letter to the Ephesians in which the author acknowledges God as the God of every family in heaven and on earth. The writer of the letter then goes on to pray that God will strengthen the inner being of the members of the Christian community in Ephesus with the power of the Spirit and that the Christ might dwell in their hearts as they are being rooted and grounded in love. May they come to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that they may be filled with the fullness of God, all to the end that God may be glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations.

As to what these words may mean for us, both for those who are younger and those who are older, for all of us who are called to live our lives fully in all the seasons of life’s journey, let the conversation begin. Amen.