

Living in a Legacy

2 Kings 2:1-12

February 14, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

I have a picture to show you today. I'm going to put it on the screen for those of you with video, and I'm going to describe it for the rest of you. This is a bookshelf that I inherited from my grandmother. It's about six and a half feet tall, almost 4 feet wide. It's made of oak. It's heavy enough that you need at least two people to move it. It has glass doors, and at the top, there's a decorative mirror and two little fancy decorative shelves. It's old. Before it was my grandmother's, it belonged to her mother- and father-in-law. And before it was theirs, it was someone else's. They bought it used. We don't know for sure, but we figure it was made in the 1880s sometime. I've never seen another cabinet quite like it. It's one of several pieces of furniture that I took home from her house after she died. My brother and I were the only grandchildren, so there was more than enough furniture and keepsakes for us to have tangible memories to take with us.

It's part of a legacy, her legacy, that I keep with me. It's far from the most important thing. The intangible legacy—her love for all kinds of children, her hard headedness, her persistence—I like to think those are an inheritance that I also carry with me, more important than furniture. But still, this bookcase is a blessing to me. I think it's beautiful, and it reminds me of her.

But I have not always thought it beautiful, and it was not always a blessing to me. I'm going to show you what it used to look like. Here it is, in her house, with her things in it. Lots of vases and glassware and china and keepsakes. That oak was painted antique green, inside and out. There was decorative chicken wire inside the glass doors. This is what the bookcase looked like when we first brought it home. My mom, who had seen it before it was painted, assured me that it could be beautiful again.

But it was going to take a lot of work. Refinishing it was going to be difficult. Stripping that paint out of the grain of the oak, not to mention off of the curlicues on the little shelves and the decorative woodwork around the glass. It was enough to make a person tired, just contemplating it. There were two alternatives to doing it myself: keeping it green and chicken wired. Or paying someone to refinish it. I started asking everywhere I went if someone knew a furniture refinisher. And based on a "someone in Cuero, just off the main road, his name is Mr. Cano" I found him. He had it completed in two weeks. It cost more money than I wanted to spend, but about what I had expected.

The legacy of the bookcase was both blessing and burden. A blessing in the memories it carried, and a burden the keeping of it required. It is still both. It's hard to move, with those glass doors and fussy shelves. I've had to have special conversations with people giving us moving estimates twice now. And then additional special conversations with the movers themselves, who always seem surprised that it's going to require extra fuss to protect it, despite my best efforts at an early warning. But it's blessings far outweigh the burdens. The legacy and the carrying on of a tradition, however minor and inanimate, can be both blessing and burden.

I imagine that some of you have similar things that belonged to your parents, or grandparents. Some of you may take care of land that is a legacy in your family. Or a family business. All of these can be a burden or a blessing. And even those intangible legacies can be both burden and blessing. Maybe your grandmother always hosted Thanksgiving dinner at her house, and now you feel like you have to do the same, even though you don't like to cook and your house is small. Maybe carried on the family ranching business even though you're scared of cows, because you wanted to keep the property and needed the agricultural tax exemption. You get the idea. Legacies, traditions, expectations, can all lie heavy on our shoulders.

Elisha inherited a legacy from Elijah the prophet. And that legacy and tradition weighs heavy on his shoulders. We pop in this morning in the middle of the story and leave before it's finished. Elisha has been learning from Elijah and following in his footsteps. Everyone, including both Elisha and Elijah, know that Elijah will soon die. Elisha insists on accompanying him on his last journey, through cities and towns important to not only Elijah himself but to the Israelite people in general. The company of prophets seem to be sort of like Elijah's disciples—prophets that followed him and learned from his ministry. They kind of want Elisha to stop following Elijah around, but it's clear that Elisha feels compelled to stay with Elijah to the very end.

At the Jordan River, they cross back over out of the Promised Land into Egypt, with Elijah separating the waters just as Joshua had done. And then Elijah passes his legacy to Elisha, who requests a double share of his spirit. Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind, with chariots of fire and horses of fire, and someday I will preach about that part of the story, but right now I have no idea what it might mean.

As soon as Elisha sees Elijah is gone, that legacy is his. Elijah's legacy of prophesy and truth telling and putting himself in danger in the process, all that is Elisha's. A double share of Elijah's spirit, laying on Elisha's shoulder. Clearly, both burden and blessing. Blessing, because to share in God's work is a blessing. And burden, because sharing in God's work also comes with opposition and difficulty.

That's where we stopped reading. But if we kept going, we learn that he picks up the mantle that Elijah dropped, parts the waters of the Jordan just as Elijah had done, and crosses back into the land of the Israelites. The company of prophets confirms that Elisha now has Elijah's spirit and agree to serve him. But they doubt what happened to Elijah and have to go look for him even though Elisha told them not to. So the legacy that Elisha carries is a blessing and burden, right from the get-go.

As a church, both our corner of the church, and the larger church, we carry legacies, too. We carry traditions that can be both blessing and burden. And I think one thing we've learned in the past year is that some traditions we thought were important, aren't really. That some traditions we thought were essential were not our legacies after all, that our legacies were something deeper. Let me give you an example of what I mean here.

Coming together in the church building on Sunday morning was our legacy, our tradition, had been our tradition for 142 years. That was a legacy and something we thought was essential. It turns out that it wasn't. That tradition that we carried was really a substitute for something deeper. That something deeper is the legacy that the church gathers together to both worship God and love one another. And we can do that, we've learned, in another way. It's not the same. But I believe we've been faithful to the legacy while not clinging to the particular parts of the tradition so hard that we lose sight of the bigger legacy.

We all carry legacies of various kinds. Some worth holding on to. Some not. Some heavier than others. Some blessing, some burden, some both at the same time. It's always worth taking a look at those legacies, re-examining what is good and faithful about them, and what is us hanging on to "the way things have always been" so strongly that we can't move toward where God is leading us next.