

“Family Is More than Resemblance”

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Susquehanna Annual Conference – Celebration of Life and Resurrection

May 4, 2017

I was named for my two grandfathers---Charles and William. My paternal grandfather was known as “Big Charlie.” He had a son, my father, who he named Paul. However everyone called my dad “Little Charlie” even though his name was Paul. My dad had two sons Charlie and Paul. So now everyone called my dad “Big Charlie” even though his name was Paul. And they called me “Little Charlie” because well I am, Charlie. However everyone thinks I am the junior when in reality my brother Paul is the junior since my dad’s real name is Paul. To make matters worse, my mother called my dad neither by Paul nor Charlie, but by his middle name, Richard. This is absolutely a true story. Oh by the way, we have two sons named Steve and Gordy.

My father was a much different man than me. He finished sixth grade. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. My dad was a painter who often painted very high off the ground. I don’t like heights. He had hand callouses so hard that he could light a match, blow it out, and immediately push it into his hands. I get a blister using a computer mouse too much!

My father has been gone twenty-seven years now. He had smoked too much, drank too much and the toxic oil-based fumes probably didn’t help. All I have to remember really is this paint-covered ladder.

He was fifty-seven when he died.

I am fifty-seven.

When I was young in Sunday School at Grace EUB in Carlisle, there was a time that I thought Elijah and Elisha were twins. I think my confusion stemmed from the fact that my Sunday School teacher used the same felt figure on the flannelgraph to describe both Elijah and Elisha. When the felt figure was on the left of the board, it was Elijah. When it was on the right, it was Elisha.

I have always been fascinated with the relationship between Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah had gone up to Mt. Horeb, the same mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. There Elijah had also encountered God.

He encountered God not in a burning bush, not in the great wind that broke rocks before Elijah's eyes, not in the earthquake that shook the ground, or in the fire that followed. No Elijah had encountered God in a still small voice which had told him among other things to go find Elisha and make him his successor, treat him like a son, train him to be a prophet.

So Elijah did. He found Elisha plowing a field with oxen, and Elijah came up to Elisha...and threw his mantle (his coat) upon Elisha.

It was a powerful moment-the mantle of Elijah. We now live in time where many people have many clothes. Some of us have clothes we keep which we never wear. Some of have summer clothes, winter clothes, work clothes, play clothes, and the list goes on...

But in Elijah's time, people were often known for the one set of clothes that they regularly wore, because that is all they had. Furthermore, people were often identified by that one outfit, like the gardener with a robe with only one sleeve.

If it was me, I would be the chubby one with the ketchup stain on his belly.

People knew about the mantle of Elijah. Some in that time believed it had mystical powers of its own.

And now that mantle was on Elisha. I wonder what Elisha was thinking.

I Kings tells us he went back and said goodbye to this family, but then followed Elijah and became his disciple.

Elisha was now following his path as the designated, God-chosen successor to perhaps the greatest Hebrew rock star around!

Elijah was a legend in his own time.

Elijah had seemingly created food out of nothing.
He had raised a woman's son who was not breathing.
He had stood up against wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.
Everyone knew the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel defeating 450 prophets of Baal.
And the miracles continued one after another.

And Elisha was supposed to succeed this guy? Are you kidding me?

Elisha did become a prophet but he always had Elijah to lean on for support, until one day on the way Gilgal, it became apparent that Elijah was going away.

Before this happened, Elisha had asked Elijah for a double-portion of his spirit

Biblical scholars have disagreed what this request mean. Some say it was the natural inheritance that a first-born son would request. Other scholars say it was a less than humble Elisha asking to be twice as great as Elijah.

I really think it relates to an expression that has come down through the ages.
Elisha just hoped to be half the person that Elijah was

But then the Chariots of Fire came and took Elijah into heaven. In his grief, Elisha tore his own clothes. But then he picked up Elijah's mantle and moved on with his life and ministry. He would prophesy in his own right. He would perform miracles in the name of God. And soon, people saw Elijah's spirit in Elisha.

But Elisha was not Elijah. He was himself, with his own unique gifts, and his own unique call.

I often think of this passage at this time of year, because while it may be Annual Conference, it is also the season of itinerancy. In a few short weeks, moving trucks from around this Conference will go to every one of our Districts bringing new shepherds, with new dreams, with words to encourage the faithful, and hopefully to make new disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

But spouses will also be looking for new jobs, anxious children will be seeking new friendships, and all those mysteries of a new place will unfold.

I hope all of us are keeping these pastors who are about to move in prayer. It is never an easy life, even though in our tradition, we believe it is a necessary life.

So please pray for the new year of our “Elisha’s” who have that same anxiety in their new journey. Let them know the spirit of their God walks with them.

Let us pray for them because we are United Methodists.

Sometimes there are those in our Connection that forget this collegial truth. At several events in our general connection, I was amazed how often I heard in conversation and presentation the word “Methodist” without the word “United.”.

But we are United Methodist, and nowhere is that more important than within the bounds of Susquehanna Conference.

In 1765, a German Reformed pastor named Philip Wiliam Otterbein moved from Frederick Maryland to York Pennsylvania, the town in which I now live. One of the reasons he had moved there was to be closer to his wife’s relatives in Lancaster. He pastored in a congregation that was almost twenty years old in a town that was almost twenty-five years old. There were only about 200 houses in York at that time. Besides his ministry in town, he also would preach in the country and go to Maryland, and even Virginia to preach at times. During these visits, he would hear about the work of other preachers. One of the most interesting was the work of a Martin Boehm who was bringing “a spiritual awakening” to many people in Lancaster County. Boehm was not a seminary-trained preacher; he was a farmer in whom God had blessed with a powerful word.

Somewhere in the next couple of years, Otterbein felt called to investigate this preacher-farmer. In 1766-67, Otterbein took a trip from York to a farm owned by Isaac Long, six miles northeast of Lancaster. There were so many people there, that the large barn on the Long farm was overfilled. They sent the overflow crowd out into the orchard to hear another preacher from Virginia. But Otterbein had managed to find a place in the barn. Boehm preached. The message was so

powerful and so real that when Boehm was finishing, Otterbein ran up to Boehm before he could even sit down. Otterbein wrapped his arms around him and said in German, “we are brothers.”

To some it may have looked funny, the University-trained cleric and the simple preacher farmer. But these two men, as different as they might have appeared, together started a new journey of faith and birthed an important part of our denominational heritage.

It is from that point, that the “United” in United Methodism truly came to be.

This unity had a journey through the United Brethren and Evangelical United Brethren denominations. And in 1968 when United Methodism was formed through merger, it was claimed by all of us.....and it should never be forgotten.

And yet while it belongs to all of us, I’d like to think that it especially belongs to us in the Susquehanna Conference because it was from here that Otterbein journeyed to hear God in a new voice.

It was not about being the same and it was not about differences. It was about being part of God’s plan that brought together persons of different walks of life, and different ways of life and caused them to see that there was something “United” in each other.

But this isn’t anything new. As Bishop Park has reminded us that we are better together, we have the tradition that we have always been better together. We are more than a church of John Wesley, of Otterbein, of Boehm, of Albright, of Susannah Wesley, of Bishops, of Clergy, of Laity, of Conferences, of Agencies, Caucuses and Commissions....we are the Church of Jesus Christ!

And on this night, we are in awe of special people that we honor and remember.

We honor them for their sermons which lifted hearts, for the quiet prayers that reached out to God, for their wise counsel and loving graces. We honor the patience of laity who supported not only their pastors but their churches. We remember those who did their best to help the congregations get along when

perhaps they weren't too agreeable. We give thanks that God has given these their cheeks a kiss in eternity

And to their families, we honor you. We honor you for the time you had family plans cancelled and still loved and believed. We honor you for the times people spoke badly of those you loved and yet you persevered. We honor you for the times you moved and the times you felt perhaps you were standing still.

Please know this

When the Hebrews left for the promised land, they took with them the bones of their forefather Joseph as a reminder that to get where they needed to go, they needed to remember where they have been.

Please know in a similar spirit, we take the memories of your loved ones, press them to our hearts, and journey to a new day in Jesus Christ.

Amen!