

**June 27, 2010
1 Kings 19:19-21
2 Kings 2:1-15
Creekside COB**

“CHOOSE ONE CHAIR”

Betty Kelsey

A young man walked into a card shop looking for an appropriate card for his girlfriend. He asked the store clerk to pick out something for him that would express his very deep sentiment. She picked out the best-selling card and gave it to the young man -- it simply said, “To the only girl I have ever loved.” The young man said, “Terrific. I’ll take six of those!”

To choose or not to choose -- that is the question this young man could not answer.

When Luciano Pavorotti was a boy, his father introduced him to the wonders of song. Urging Luciano to develop his voice, the father engaged a professional tenor in their hometown to take the boy as a pupil. Later, Luciano also enrolled in a teachers college. At graduation, he asked his father, “Shall I be a teacher or a singer?”

“Luciano,” said his father, “if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.” Luciano chose to be a singer, even though it took 7 years to make his first professional appearance, and another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. “Whatever we choose,” Luciano said, “commitment is the key. Choose one chair.”

God wanted Israel to choose one chair. King Ahab allowed his Canaanite wife, Jezebel, to replace the altars of Yahweh with altars to worship Baal and other Canaanite gods. Elijah gave Israel an ultimatum, “How long will you vacillate between Yahweh and Baal? You have to choose! If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” To encourage a choice, God sent a paralyzing drought and famine that lasted three and one half years! Then Elijah challenged Israel to a contest of power between the prophets of Baal and of Yahweh. There were 450 prophets of Baal to only one Elijah! Meeting on Mt. Carmel, each side built an altar and prepared a bull for sacrifice. Everyone understood that “the god who answers by fire is indeed God.”

All morning and afternoon the prophets of Baal called on their gods-- loud and louder. No response. When it was Elijah's turn, just to make sure there was no question about Yahweh's power, he drenched his altar with water. The answer from Yahweh came without delay. Fire fell and everything was consumed--offering, wood, stones, and water -- nothing was left to clean up. Even more important--it started raining again. Convinced, the people exclaimed, "Yahweh is indeed God." (Interesting that Elijah's name means "Yahweh is God"!)

Elisha, whose name means, "the God who saves," is another story about choosing. Commanded by God to anoint Elisha as his successor, the older prophet found him plowing with 12 pair of oxen in his field. Elijah was wearing a long flowing mantle, which is a loose, sleeveless cloak, often denoting authority. As Elijah passed by Elisha, he threw his mantle over Elisha's shoulders. That's a strange way to anoint someone! Elisha interpreted the act as a call to follow, and he said "yes." He killed all 12 teams of oxen, burned up his plow as kindling for a barbecue, roasted the ox meat and distributed it to his neighbors and family, then said goodbye and followed Elijah. No looking back!

Elisha's story in 2 Kings 2 reads like *The Three Bears* or *Three Little Pigs*--one plot repeated three times. First -- Elisha is told by a group of prophets, "Today Elijah will be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind." Elisha says, "I know. Keep it quiet." Second--Elijah insists that Elisha stay behind as he travels from Gilgal to Bethel, to Jericho, to the Jordan. Third-- Elisha refuses to stay behind. It is a circular journey that makes no sense, except to prove Elisha's commitment. At the Jordan River, Elijah rolled up his mantle, struck the water, and like the Exodus story, the waters parted and they crossed on dry ground.

Satisfied with Elisha's faithfulness, Elijah asked, "What can I do for you before I am taken away from you?" Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. He wasn't asking to do twice as much as Elijah or to be twice as powerful, but to receive the double inheritance of an older son. Only if Elisha witnessed Elijah's departure could he receive that gift. While walking and talking together, horses and chariots of fire separated them, and as a whirlwind carried Elijah heavenward, his mantle fell to the ground.

Elisha picked up the mantle -- that symbol of Elijah's Spirit -- and returned to the Jordan. Rolling up the mantle, he struck the water, crying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" The waters parted and Elisha crossed on dry land, proving to himself and the prophets who watched that Elisha now had the spirit and authority of Elijah. He was no longer servant, but prophet; no longer follower, but leader. He was on his own, with much trepidation, and much to learn.

Not that being a follower is bad. A young woman wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank, "Are you a leader?" She answered "no" and returned the application. To her surprise, she got a letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

Three things stand out to me from the story of Elisha. First, he showed total commitment -- unlike the young man in the card shop,

he wasn't afraid to make a choice. When Elijah "anointed" him, Elisha burned all bridges behind him to follow the prophet of God. Second, he showed wisdom. When asked what he wanted as a parting gift, Elisha revealed his true character by showing he was a spiritual man. Third, he accepted the authority of his new role. Recognizing that the mantle symbolized his calling, Elisha claimed it, for good or for bad, and others acknowledged his new authority.

I wonder, how do we pass the test of commitment, wisdom and authority? Norman Cousins tells of his conversation with a Hindu priest during a trip to India. The priest, Satis Prasad, wanted to come to our country as a missionary. Cousins assumed he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion. Satis Prasad said, "Oh, no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs, not membership, but believers. Your people claim they believe in Christianity, but from what I see, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I ask that either you accept the teachings of Jesus . . . or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs, not membership, but believers. Christianity in the abstract would be, “Oh, sure, Elijah, I’d like to come with you, but first I have family obligations to take care of.” We know what Jesus said about that. Not that family relationships are negated, but God wants to know who comes first. Elisha moved beyond abstract Yahwehism when he killed his oxen and burned his plow. It wasn’t “maybe” but a full-fledged “yes.”

I’m sure you’ve seen or heard the object lesson of the rocks. First, you take a large container and fill it with big rocks. You still see spaces, so you add gravel. That fills up the cracks but it still isn’t full. So you pour in sand to fill in around the gravel. Finally, to make it completely full, you add water -- up to the brim. The point of the illustration is not to cram your schedule with as many good commitments as possible. The point is: if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.

Jesus said, “Follow me.” That’s a BIG ROCK! It affects everything!

Getting our priorities straight means changing “I will, but. . .” to simply “I will.” Then all the other pieces of our life will fall into place.

***[Dropping a rock into a container for each]* Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Love God. Love neighbor. Love self. These are BIG ROCKS, the ones that make everything else fall into their proper place! Choose them first.**

Let’s pray.

Heart and mind, possessions, Lord, I offer unto Thee.

All these were thine, Lord, thou didst give them all to me.

Wondrous are thy doings unto me.