

First Presbyterian Church
September 16, 2012
Rev. Pendleton B. Peery

Inadequate

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’

Then I said,
‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’

But the Lord said to me,
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;
and the Lord said to me,

‘See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.’

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Richard Lischer, a professor at a certain Divinity School 11 miles away from Chapel Hill, wrote a book a few years ago about his first experience as a Lutheran pastor in rural Illinois. The past few weeks, I’ve found myself thinking about the book often.

Lischer describes his situation:

“My new congregants were expected to welcome an inexperienced 28-year-old stranger into a community as tightly sealed as a jar of pickles. The church had decreed that henceforth I would be spiritual guide, public teacher, and beloved sage

with a stroke of a wand. God – or the Bishop –had just made me an expert in troubled marriages, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, and farm subsidies.”¹

First of all, can you imagine a church calling a pastor that young?

The better part of wisdom is that congregations should wait on calling their pastors until they are well seasoned and experienced...maybe by the time they are 33, or 35, or 40.

Secondly, haven't you been there?

Maybe it was your first job, or your new promotion. Maybe it was the day you were married, or that first, terrifying night you spent at your home with your new baby. Maybe it was the first day of class in middle or high school or college...there comes a point when you stop and you look around and you ask yourself just who in the world thought you were up to the task.

It can be a scary feeling; overwhelming; even lonely.

Anyone who has not experienced what it is like to feel inadequate has another problem – an inflated sense of ego. Feeling inadequate is part of what it means to be human – and we have all been there.

* * *

In our scripture this morning we hear that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah to inform him that he would be a prophet to the nations.

No one wants to be a prophet.

Prophets aren't the ones who get to bring good news of glad tidings and great joy.

Prophets say things like:

I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.²

Prophets say things like:

Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the North and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace.³

¹ Lischer, Richard, Open Secrets.

² Jeremiah X:XX

³ Jeremiah X:XX

That is what Jeremiah got to say on God's behalf.
No one wants to say things like that.

At my last church we had a weekly service of midday prayer on Wednesdays. A small group of the faithful would gather in the chancel to pray, to sing, and to read scripture together. Our method for reading the scriptures was to pick a book and read one chapter a week – straight through. We started with Jeremiah.

The book of Jeremiah has 52 chapters – full of prophesy that is hard to hear. I guess it was around the 7th or 8th week that the good folks in Shreveport started wishing that Jeremiah, like Samuel, had lived in a time when the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread.

Yet the word of God did come to Jeremiah, and when it did he followed what is the typical pattern in most call stories in scripture; his first response to God's summons on his life was not a 'yes' but an excuse.

“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

I am sure that Jeremiah wasn't too keen on some of the aspects of being a prophet, but even deeper than that aversion what I hear more in the excuse he gives to God is an admission that he felt inadequate for the job.

And notice God's response.

God does not say – “Don't worry, Jeremiah. There is an apprenticeship for people like you going into the prophetic ministry.”

No, what God says is “Do not be afraid.”

God does not say – *you are adequate.*

God says – *I will be with you.*

* * *

The world we live in places a high premium on being adequate. Actually, it is more – the world we live in leads us to believe that we all must exceed what is considered adequate; that the goal is to live up to the standard of that mythical place where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.”⁴

When you drill down, the desire to be more than adequate is rooted in a search for identity...in a search for worth. It is driven by questions that can never be fully answered:

Are we good enough?

Have we done enough?

⁴ Thank you, Garrison Keillor.

Do we measure up?

As compared to whom?

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, and continuing in the gospel ministry of Jesus, the Lord's people find the source of their life, their identity and their worth...not out there, but in the covenant promises of God.⁵

For the Christian, who we are and whose we are and how successful we are is not determined by the measuring stick of the world around us; rather, the answer to who we are and whose we are...as well as how worthy we are...is found in the covenant waters of baptism – which are a sign and a seal of God's grace in Jesus Christ; a covenant promise that is freely given and abundant.

So it is that covenant people are freed from worry about being worthy. We are worthy – you are worthy – not because of what we do but because of what God has done.

And it is because we are already deemed worthy that the shape of our covenant life is not molded around achievement but around call. The point of our life is not to prove ourselves one to another, but to glorify the God who grants us our life.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that from the very beginning, for God's covenant people, the proper response to the Lord's faithfulness and claim on our lives is obedience.⁶

Our oldest son, Wells, started kindergarten three weeks ago. It has been a wonderful experience, but like most kids going back to school after a long summer break, he is going through a period of behavioral adjustment. One night at the supper table last week Wells began rubbing his ears and complaining that he had a little bit of what he called a "hearing problem." This was surprising to Lindsey and me because we had just taken Wells to the doctor for an annual check-up where they had tested his hearing and pronounced him healthy. Upon more questioning on the part of his parents, Wells told us that his ears must be stopped up because his teacher told him that he needed to work on his listening.

Don't we all.

So often the voice of the God to whom we should listen and be obedient is drowned out by other voices that demand to be heard.

Voices that measure our worth by the metric of dollars and cents.

Voices that constrict our thinking and our acting based on the rigid ideology of this political party or the other.

⁵ Brueggemann, Walter, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 4.

⁶ *ibid*

Voices that create a false picture of what it means to succeed – as a parent, or a student, or an employee, or a spouse, or a person.

I doubt I need to tell you that there is not a way we can live up to the demands of those kinds of voices –
because we can never earn enough,
we can never be pure enough,
we can never be successful enough.

And contrasted to those voices stands the freedom of the gospel's promise – of the covenant life – that, by God's grace, we are enough.

The One who calls us to participate in the inbreaking of the kingdom of heaven isn't concerned with how adequate we are for the task...only that we will trust, and listen, and follow.

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You will never know how much of a privilege it is for me to stand before you as your new pastor. I am filled with both gratitude and joy.

When I think about what it might mean for us to live into our motto to be “for Christ in the heart of Charlotte” in this next great chapter of our life together I am struck by the audacity of that goal.

I am energized by the possibilities that may emerge for us.

I am hopeful that we would be bold in our pursuit of those possibilities.

And I am counting on the fact that even in those times when we don't feel adequate in doing what is asked of us – you and I might help each other trust in God's promise to be faithful – so that we also might be.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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