

Who, Me?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, January 24, 2010 Jeremiah 1:4-10

I never went to middle school. It wasn't because I was a drop-out, or because I was some kind of genius who got to skip three grades. It is because back then, where I lived anyway, there was no such thing. We called it Junior High, and it covered grades 7, 8 and 9.

But whatever you call it, those years between elementary school and high school are challenging for both students and parents, not to mention teachers. Sharon Waldrop, who writes for a website called "preteenagerstoday.com," shares her own experience with her daughter:

"On a recent Wednesday afternoon I asked my seventh-grader, 'How was school today?' Her response consisted of a 10-minute synopsis of lunchtime antics, hallway romances and jokes that only a 12-year-old would appreciate. My suspicion that she was having too much fun at school was confirmed later that evening when I received a progress report conveniently left for me on my pillow at bedtime.

My former A/B student had an unsatisfactory grade point average in three of her six classes. I immediately picked up the phone to arrange three parent/teacher/student conferences to identify the problem. The first teacher I contacted assured me that my daughter's performance had nothing to do with her learning ability. The problem was that my daughter was in middle school."

Many other parents could tell similar tales, including mine. Let's just say that those were not "stellar" years for me, academically or behaviorally. I did play basketball, which surprises my kids, and I was president of the A.V. club, which amuses them to no end, but like Sharon Waldrop's daughter, my grades took a plunge and I thought and acted as if I was much cooler than I was (or ever would be).

I'm telling you this so you can understand that when I first said I was thinking about going into ministry, it was as a joke. In school, we were given an assignment to explore a career we would be interested in, write a report on what it involved, what preparation was required, and what the salary might be. I decided, just for laughs, to write a report about going into the ministry. My teachers, who said I had a smart mouth and a bad attitude (and they were right, by the way), managed not to laugh out loud at my choice.

But, as is obvious now, it was God who got the last laugh. It was a few years later, when I got to high school, got serious and started thinking about my future, that I sensed an authentic call. And thirty-five years later, I guess you could say the joke is on me. I've been in ministry my entire adult life.

Many of those pursuing ministry training today are much older than I was. Some surveys show the average age of seminary students to be 35. But the call may come to anyone at any time. Just ask Jeremiah.

Our text today describes the call of Jeremiah and his reluctance to accept it. Jeremiah experienced God's call to be a prophet, and he responded as many of us do when we are asked to do something we fear is beyond our ability. Jeremiah said, more or less, "Who, me? No, not me . . . I'm just a kid."

Now, to be fair to Jeremiah, the task was daunting. God came to Jeremiah in the 13th year of King Josiah's reign, about 626 B.C.E., and appointed the youth "a prophet to the nations." But those nations were in turmoil. In Jeremiah's own country, King Josiah was a spiritually upright leader, but he was hampered by the dead weight of his grandfather Manasseh's 55-year reign. Manasseh had led the nation into idolatry to such a degree that even his late-life conversion to the Lord God was not sufficient to undo the idolatrous habits of the people. As a result, Judah lived under a stern judgement.

And internationally, things were no better. Although the neighboring Assyrians, who had threatened Judah during Manasseh's reign, were collapsing under the attack of the Babylonians, that nation was quickly filling the power gap. The Egyptians, too, were involved in the struggle, and Judah was often caught in the middle. Thus we can understand why Jeremiah felt insufficient and why he declared his inadequacies.

Ultimately, of course, Jeremiah agreed to serve and God supplied the wisdom, courage and eloquence he needed to do the job. Jeremiah was not exactly successful, if by "successful" you mean persuasive enough to change people's behavior. The warnings he gave went largely unheeded, and eventually God allowed the Babylonians to come and conquer the holy city of Jerusalem. But in the Bible, success in prophecy is never measured merely by how many people accept what you say. "Success" in prophecy means fidelity. It means you faithfully spoke the message God gave you, regardless of how it was received.

And in that sense, Jeremiah was a great success. His life as a prophet was much more difficult than his life would have been if he hadn't become a prophet. He experienced opposition, threats, arrest, imprisonment and

ridicule. But he had the consolation of knowing that he was part of what God was doing in the world. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he was doing what he was meant to do.

That consolation and satisfaction is available to us all, you know. We aren't all called to be prophets or preachers, but we are all called to do something. God is still at work in the world, and we can understand what God is up to even better than Jeremiah. That might seem like an arrogant thing to say – that we can know more about what God is about than a famous prophet. The reason we are justified in making such a claim, however, is simple: God told Jeremiah, but in Jesus Christ, God both told and showed us what God wills.

Ordinary people who try to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ can accomplish a great deal. In fact, they have since the beginning. In the second century, when Christianity was still a minority religion in the Roman Empire, there was a Roman philosopher named Celsus who was an aggressive antagonist of Christianity. He wrote scornfully of Christianity being carried forth by “wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels.”

By the way, by “bucolic” Celsus meant Christians were unsophisticated, ignorant, backward bumpkins.

In the status-conscious Roman Empire, Celsus could hardly have been more insulting. But what he didn't understand was that what he saw as a weakness was Christianity's strength. Spreading the faith and exercising the love of God wasn't just the job of some professionals or the elite, but the passion of ordinary people. They are the ones who put legs on our faith and carried it into the places where the general population went each day. They --- that is, you – still do. The work of the church is not just the work of the ordained. It is also the work of the laity. How you live matters as much or more than what I say. I preach. You witness. The kindness you show, the forgiveness you offer, the generosity you demonstrate, the compassion you exhibit -- that's how you fulfill your calling, how you serve God, wherever you go and whatever you do. The success of God's work in the world depends on whether and how well you fulfill your calling to show the world what a life committed to God looks like.

Right now, some of you may be having a Jeremiah moment. You might be saying, “What? Who, me? I can't do that. I'm too young/old/tired/busy. I don't know enough. I have too many bad habits. There have to be people more qualified.” Well, there may be people more qualified, but they don't live where you live. They don't work where you work. They aren't married

to the person you are married to. They are the father or mother to your children. For all sorts of reasons like that, they aren't in position to do what you are called to do, what only you are able to do – and that is, to live your life for the glory of God and your neighbor's good, to show the people in your life what a difference Jesus can make in a person. Only you – only you – can do that.

Will you?

Amen.