



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 11 – Proper 16 (C)

#### Our Limits

[RCL] Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Almost every call narrative in scripture comes with a protest.

Moses is famous for his protest. It's multiple. He has reason after reason of why he might not be fit to lead God's people out of Egypt, a whole chapter full of reasons in fact. Wouldn't you, too, come up with a long list that such a job might not be for you?

When Mary, the mother of our Lord, was approached to be commissioned as a prophet in her own right, she protests less, but still, there's a protest: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she asks the angel Gabriel. How can God work with this impossible material, she wonders. How can God work with the limits of our humanity? The limits of nature?

Well, the prophet Jeremiah, as heard in our Old Testament scripture reading, also protests: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

A classic prophetic protest. "I don't know how to do this. I don't have the words. I'm too young. I'm not wise enough. I'm not good enough. I'm not sure you have the right person in mind, dearest Lord."

For any of us who have felt out of our depths, in over our heads, not equipped for the task ahead, not prepared for an unexpected vocation, well, we have a friend in Jeremiah and all the reluctant prophets who come before. We have a friend in these biblical characters who are very unsure about becoming the Lord's mouthpiece or God's instrument.

There is a quiet beauty to the prophet's humility. Anyone who would quickly grab for the mantle of the Lord, who was convinced they were well and duly prepared for such a job... well, that's concerning for all sorts of other reasons. But it seems that a prophet's reluctance, their unnerving humility, is something the Lord readily seeks after. Someone who isn't quite sure of their own capacity, their own skills, their own identity, even. These are the people the Lord empowers to become prophets: The last born in a world where the first born were honored. The slow to speak in a culture that honored crafted rhetoric. The slave

girl in a land of kings. The young in a realm where the old were lauded. A girl from Nazareth who was willing to say, “Yes.”

The Lord has no fear of our limits and seems to relish using them. But what is our relationship with them?

We so often try to blow past our limits. Outrun them, hide from them, try to transcend them. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said that “the hardest thing in the world is to be where we are.” Perhaps we might add, “The hardest thing is to be who we are.” It’s hard to occupy our lives as they are, limits and all, geographical and spiritual, personality and physical. We receive messages from all around, whispering and persuading that if we just worked a bit harder, if we slept the right amount, if we bought the correct facial serum, if we ate the right amount of protein, if we went to the correct college, and said the right thing to the right people, if we lived in the right ZIP code and we were simultaneously beautiful, strong, and smart, then, then, then... then what? We wouldn’t die? We wouldn’t face the heartbreak we all endure? We wouldn’t suffer? We wouldn’t grow old? We wouldn’t be afraid to speak? We wouldn’t have the very real physical, spiritual, and emotional limitations of our lives?

Unlike our own relationships with our limitations and shortcomings, the Lord looks upon us and sees how grace might walk with our weakness, how the divine power might touch those places in ourselves that feel unusable, how the Lord kisses our feebleness with courage.

The Lord responds to Jeremiah’s protest with two main assurances: I will be with you, and I will give you the words. In fact, those words are on your lips right now. Do you feel how they roll on your tongue, how they taste of heaven? Do you sense that as soon as you open your mouth, something strange and wonderful will roll out, something terrifying and transformative? Do you feel your vocal cords anointed and the breath of your speech sanctified?

Our Lord does not promise that we will transcend our limits or even outgrow them. It’s likely that Jeremiah thought, like many of us, over and over again, that he was not worthy and that he was not ready and that God should have chosen someone else for the task at hand.

But God promises that God will be with us, and that because he is with us, there will be provision. In light of God’s abundant grace, our limits suddenly become a resource in the kingdom of God, a resource for God’s power to come and meet our community’s needs. There is no need to ignore those places in ourselves we deem insufficient. Instead, we could offer them up to God, along with our gifts and our privileges. What if we let our protests melt, as those prophets eventually did, and learned to offer our limited lives, as they are:

Here, Lord, today is my zapped energy and my impoverished imagination. Here are my inadequate thoughts and my tired body. Here is a sorrowful soul and a groaning creation. Here is our decaying church and here are our wrecked dreams. Here are our measly resources and here are our broken

relationships. Here are all the places in our lives and in the world where our lack gnaws and our hunger aches. Here we are, Lord, and we need you.

For to admit our lack is to inch closer to admitting our need. Our need for the only One who can satisfy such hunger.

We need your assurance and your presence, Holy One. We need your power and your peace. We need your words on our lips and in our hearts. We need your abundance and your provision. We need your wisdom for these days. We need you, most of all, we need you, walking alongside us. Carrying the load of our lives and transforming our lack into love.

While we tend to rail against the limits of our lives, the God of the universe, the King of the cosmos, willingly constrained himself to become one of us. He emptied himself so that he could enter our frail flesh. So that he could walk our dusty and decaying streets. So that he would be close to our raw need. He became our need and our sustenance, the victim and the priest, the meal and the host. In the person of Jesus, we see God limiting Godself for the sake of the whole world. The incarnational limits of our God made way for the salvation of the entire creation. Our God descended to the utter limitation of death. And it was there, that we see what God does with the limits of nature, the limits of our bodies, the limits of our lives, the limits of our humanity: God resurrects.

God transforms even the dearth of death into a gate of true and abundant life.

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