

Talking Back
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-21

Heather Prince Doss
Sea Island Presbyterian Church
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I do not hold on to many regrets in my life, but there are a few mistakes that continue to haunt me, a few things I still wish I could go back and do differently. Several years ago, one of my cousins miscarried for the third pregnancy in a row. I felt terribly sad for her, but despite the nudging of the Spirit, I found it hard to pick up the phone and call. In a painful inner monologue, I would argue with myself. "Heather, you really should call," I would say. And then I'd answer, "What do I know about loss like that? I cannot offer any comfort. I do not know what to say." Even this relatively small gesture of a phone call felt huge. I am sorry to say my sense of awkwardness and inadequacy won out over compassion and friendship. For months I did not talk to my cousin.

Listen to the story of Jeremiah:

"Jeremiah," the Lord called to a young man, the son of a priest. "Jeremiah, I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah's response is raw and honest. "Lord, what do I know about the nations? I am young and not wise. I would not know what to say." Jeremiah must have felt miniscule before such an enormous task. His voice and his will must have seemed grossly inadequate. The task is too big. I can't do it.

Listen to a story about Jesus:

"Stand up straight," Jesus commanded a woman who had been crippled and bent over for eighteen years. The woman, loosed from the infirmity that bound her, stood up. It just so happened that this day was a Sabbath day and Jewish law prohibited every kind of work. The leader of the synagogue is chagrined by Jesus' healing work, but he does not speak to Jesus directly. He does speak to the crowd that has gathered to see and hear Jesus. Perhaps some of them are also hoping to be healed. "Go on, get out of here," the synagogue leader says. "There are six other days for the work of healing, but not today. He should not be doing this today."

I can't. You shouldn't. These are the words that attack us from within and without as we walk beside Jeremiah and Jesus to answer the call of God. It is hard enough to discern God's voice among all the other voices we hear each day. (One more reason why studying the Scripture is so important!) But even when we do recognize God's voice, we sometimes fail to answer God's call because, like the bent-over woman, we are in bondage. We are bound by our own failures and limitations, and we are bound by the expectations and priorities of our culture, our families, even our religious traditions.

The good news is that even when we are reluctant or pressed hard from every side, God insists on bringing justice and healing to the world. God even insists on doing that work through us, his reluctant and hard-pressed children. When Jeremiah bemoans his own youthful naiveté and

shortage of skills, God is not impressed. “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’” God answers the prophet-in-waiting. “You will go wherever I send you and you will speak whatever I command you. For, see, I have put my words in your mouth.”

Indeed, we are not adequate for the tasks before us anymore than the boy Jeremiah was adequate to be a prophet to the nations. We may not know what to say when we pick up the phone to call a grieving friend. We may not know what to say when we go before the city council to speak on behalf of poor in our community. We may not know where to begin when building friendships with neighbors who seem different from us. But when we answer God’s call, we do not go in our own power and we do not rely on our own giftedness. We go in power of God who created us and who dwells within us by the Holy Spirit. Because it is God’s power at work in you, you are set free from the chains of inadequacy!

The pressures that come upon us from the outside can be as hard to shake off as our own sense of inadequacy. There is, of course, the expectation that we will obey the law. But where would be today without the civil disobedience of the 1950’s and 60’s that brought about more equitable rights for people of every color? Can you imagine (or maybe remember) the conversations around dinner tables as parents fearfully tried to convince their young adult children to stay home from the sit-ins and freedom rides. “You shouldn’t do that,” they might have said. “You may get arrested, or worse.” If not for the Spirit-filled willingness of many to endure arrest, imprisonment, and abuse we would be a less just nation.

There is also the persistent pressure in our culture to “keep up with the Joneses.” As people of faith, we already know that our eternal worth had nothing to do with our net worth. But how often do we find ourselves comparing our stuff to our neighbor’s stuff, our vacation to their vacation, our status to theirs? How often do we reject God’s call because it means sacrificing our comfort, our status, or our privilege? The media messages are as effective as they are relentless: “You shouldn’t do that,” they say. “You shouldn’t give up your comfort. You shouldn’t give up your status.” Those are messages of bondage. In Christ, you are free from slavery to stuff and status. In Christ, you are free to answer a call that means downward mobility.

Perhaps the most insidious pressure of all is that administered by our religious institutions. Like the synagogue leader in Luke’s gospel, the church can be a defender of the status quo at the expense of the kingdom of God. We can forget that rules do not exist for their own sake. We can forget the priority of grace. It is not so hard for me to relate to the synagogue leader in Luke’s story. After all, he was just doing his best to follow the rules and protect decency and order. If you have ever been in a position of authority and experienced the relentless pressure to grant exception after exception to the rules, then you can identify with the synagogue leader. The church is the community of people who are committed to living together according to God’s intent. Sometimes we make rules to help us do that. But we fail to be a kingdom-like community when we use our rules to limit the liberating and healing power of God.

If Jesus weighs whether or not to make an exception to the rules and heal the bent-over woman on the Sabbath, Luke does not show it. In Luke’s eye, Jesus simply sees a woman in need of healing and liberation and, before she can even ask for it, Jesus sets her free and makes her whole. The work of healing is done before the synagogue leader can even utter the words, “You

shouldn't do that." Jesus is not bound by the priorities of his culture or the limits of his religious tradition. His main concern is not human expectations and institutions but the freedom that every child of God ought to experience. In Christ, God sets us free from the human expectations that keep us from embracing the God's call and doing God's work.

I do not necessarily know what God has called you to do, but I do know that God has called you to something. It may be as difficult as a phone call to a grieving friend or as magnificent as prophet to the nations. Whether you hear God's voice loud and clear – as Jeremiah did – or as a gentle urging – as I did – may you know that in Christ you are set free from every kind of bondage. You are liberated from "I can't." You are liberated from "I can't" with the promise that God will equip you and empower you for the work that is before you. You are set free from the laws, the expectations, and the traditions that say "you shouldn't." You are set free from "you shouldn't" with the promise that grace not only abounds but it also expands like a mustard seed into a tree or yeast into a loaf of bread. Where grace is at work, the kingdom of God grows strong.

As you leave worship today, you have the opportunity to visit the Fellowship Hall where the ministries of this congregation have set up tables with information about the kingdom work they are doing. Our goal is not to twist your arm until you add one more commitment to an already overburdened schedule. Our goal is not to convince you to give more money to more good causes. But if you want to hear God's call in your life right now, I hope that you will see this little event as a way to put your ear to the ground and listen for the rumbling of the Spirit. When you hear it, may you trust in God's power to work through you, even when you are inadequate, reluctant, and hard-pressed from every side.

So be it. Amen.