

Too

Jeremiah 1:4-10

August 25, 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

For whatever reason, probably because back-to-school is on everyone's mind, I've been asked several times this week if I'm a teacher. Not by anyone I know, but by store clerks or cashiers or other random strangers. Maybe I look like a teacher? I don't know. But my immediate reaction is apparently pretty strong. "Oh, heavens no!" One person said, "Well, it isn't that bad!" I replied, "oh, I know! I'm just too...impatient. It's too hard. I couldn't ever be a teacher, but I sure appreciate people who are."

Now once upon a time, I did think I was going to be a teacher. I took classes and everything. I thought I was going to be a math teacher. One afternoon of attempting to help a daughter with math homework is enough to make the universe laugh at that goal. I know the math, at least I still know the elementary math. But it's true. I'm too impatient. When she doesn't understand the first time I explain it, I don't have another way to say it. So I say what I just said the first time, only less nicely, and she still doesn't understand. I'm too impatient. Math teacher is just not my calling, though I thought it was at one time. I'm too impatient, and I'm too tied to my own way of understanding it.

We are pretty good at inventing these sentences about ourselves. I'm too young. I'm too old. I'm too tired. I'm too busy. I'm too educated. I'm too uneducated. Too shy. Too loud. Too ignorant. Too worldly. Too experienced. Too scarred. Too timid. Too grumpy. Too uncertain. Too strange. Too normal. Too distracted. This list could go on and on and on. Churches say these same sentences, by the way. We're too small or too big or too tired or too poor or too rich or too set in our ways or too scared. These "too" sentences are ways we make excuses by describing ourselves as inadequate in some way. We're too much one way and not enough this other way.

If only we were the first people ever to do this. But we're not. We're just the latest in a long line of people who were "too" something.

Moses, you may remember, thought he was too bad at speaking to do what God had called him, to persuade Pharaoh to let God's people go (Exodus 3-4). Gideon is not quite as famous as Moses, but God chose him and called him to defeat the Midianites. Gideon's objection is that he is too weak, and in fact his whole clan is too weak, to fulfill what God is asking of him (Judges 6:11-24).

Isaiah, another person God called to be a prophet, says he is too unclean, too sinful, to possibly be a spokesperson for God, and that his friends and neighbors are also too unclean and too sinful and at the very least their bad habits have rubbed off on him (Isaiah 6:5).

In our reading today, Jeremiah is a classic example. The “too” he admits to is that he is too young. I’m only a boy, he tells God, I can’t possibly do what you’re asking me to do. Jeremiah *is* young, that’s true. But that is just one of some very good excuses he might have come up with. Let’s see what it is that he is objecting to, exactly. God has called him to be a prophet, even before he was born, God had appointed him to be a prophet. So it’s not like this is a hasty decision that God has made, without thinking it through. It’s a certainty that God wants Jeremiah to be a prophet.

And the kind of prophet that God wants Jeremiah to be is not the fun kind you might think of, the kind who has a crystal ball and could predict your lottery numbers next week, or that you will meet a tall dark and handsome stranger. That’s not the kind of prophet the Bible talks about at all. God wants Jeremiah to tell Israel to straighten up or they will lose their Temple and their land. God wants Jeremiah to tell the people that their lack of faithfulness has put God’s promises at risk. As verse 10 says, Jeremiah, at God’s instruction, will pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant. If you kept count, that is four verbs of destruction and doom and only two verbs of construction and hope. That’s the balance that Jeremiah will have to maintain, and he can foresee that living out God’s calling for him will be difficult and dangerous. All of that makes me wonder if “I’m too young,” was *really* Jeremiah’s objection. I’m too scared. I’m too worried. I’m too intimidated. I’m too inadequate for this task. Those all seem like legitimate objections, also.

And behind the scenes, in the verses just before where we started reading, we learn that Jeremiah is part of a priestly family. His family had been banished to Anathoth, a small village just outside of Jerusalem, away from the power center of the Temple, by Solomon, because Jeremiah’s priest ancestor had chosen to preach against Solomon. So Jeremiah knows well, by the history and stories of his family, the dangers of being a prophet, the dangers of speaking against those who have lots of power. This, too, makes me wonder if “I’m too young,” was the real excuse. I’m too reluctant, I’m too worried about losing what little reputation I have, I’m too cynical about what happens when a prophet does what God tells him to, I’m too experienced for a person my age, I’m too old for my years and too

weary with the consequences of being a prophet. All of that might have well been what Jeremiah meant.

Jeremiah says “I’m too young,” but he had plenty of other “toos” behind that one. Too scared, too worried, too cynical, too inadequate. Maybe Jeremiah’s “toos” are like yours. Maybe you have others like the ones I suggested before. The church, not just our church but the larger church, seems to have some of those same ones. Too small, too worried, too scared, too intimidated by the consequences, too burned out by failure, too timid to take a risk.

God’s response to Jeremiah—and you’re going to have to stick with me here a minute—God’s response to Jeremiah reminds me of dealing with my prescription insurance people. At least with our insurance, here is what happens. A doctor, you know, a person who has spent a good chunk of their life learning about medicine and going to medical school and practicing to be a doctor and actually being a doctor and learning by doing so, this doctor prescribes a certain medication to address whatever health issue I am having. So doctor prescribes the medicine and calls it into my favorite pharmacy. I go to pick it up and the pharmacy has to tell me it isn’t ready because it requires “prior authorization.” As far as I can tell, this is what “prior authorization” means: the pharmacist calls the insurance company, and the insurance company calls the doctor. The insurance company says, “you prescribed this medication for Monica. Does she really need it?” And I imagine my doctor saying, “I’m the doctor. Yes, I prescribed Monica that medicine. I think it will help her condition, otherwise why would I have prescribed it?” And if that conversation is convincing, the insurance company will cover the medication that the doctor has now said, twice, that I need. Why would my doctor have said give her this medication if it wasn’t something I needed? Of course my doctor wants to authorize the prescription—she prescribed it in the first place!

So the conversation between God and Jeremiah is something like this. God calls Jeremiah. Jeremiah says, “I’m too young; are you sure you want to call *me* to do that?” And God says, “Ahem. I’m God. Yes, I’m sure I want to do that.” Questioning the person with the ultimate authority—the doctor, or God—is not likely to lead that person to change their mind, especially with no good reason for it. So God reassures Jeremiah that yes indeed, that call was intentional and authorized. And besides all that, it doesn’t matter if you’re “too young” or any of the other “toos” that you thought you could hide from me, it doesn’t matter. Because, *I am with you*. Don’t be afraid. There’s that again, too.

Any “too” we can come up with isn’t enough to make God back off. Because God chose us. To do whatever complicated and hard and dangerous and challenging thing is ours to do. And God chose us because God knows us and will be with us.

God knowing and calling and being with Jeremiah doesn’t mean that his call isn’t dangerous or there won’t be negative consequences for fulfilling that calling. But it does mean that Jeremiah is not alone.

At this training thing that I was at in Dallas last weekend that I mentioned last week, one of the things the instructor suggested was for a church to focus on their assets rather than their deficits. This is a common tool that community organizers use, and churches have found it useful too. We humans are pretty talented at thinking of what we don’t have, what we lack, and therefore we can’t do whatever thing it is we need to do. But instead, if we focus on what we do have, the assets and talents and gifts that we do have, then we can often figure out a different way to accomplish the same task.

So, for example, if a church says “we’re too small to...have a food pantry for our neighbors.” That’s focusing on a lack—we lack enough volunteers and people to run the food pantry. If the church instead focused on what resources they do have—for instance, other churches in the community to partner with, maybe the food pantry customers could also be volunteers, an empty building next door, well, then pretty soon this food pantry project starts to seem more feasible. That’s just an example. She made us work through the resources we had to put on a worship service with no advance notice.

Jeremiah was focused on what he lacked, his long list of “toos.” But he forgot the huge resource he had at his side: God. Let’s not make that same mistake. We are not alone, no matter what God calls us to do, no matter how many “toos” we might be able to think of. Don’t be afraid. God is with us.