

## Sons and Daughters of Abraham

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

Jeremiah was only 14 or 15 when he had a life changing experience. He was minding his own business, maybe hanging out with his friends, or studying his lessons, when God spoke to him. “Jeremiah,” God said, “Jeremiah, I want you to be my prophet.” Jeremiah’s response is pretty typical of all those whom God calls, and that includes you and me; we ask if God surely hasn’t made a mistake, and we begin to list for God all the reasons why we’re not the right choice for the job. Moses had the longest list of objections – he wouldn’t be able to tell the people who had sent him, he was an outsider, why should they believe him, he wasn’t a public speaker, he tended to stutter. But God persisted, and the rest is history.

Jeremiah too protests to God that God must have called the wrong number. “Not me,” he says, “I don’t know how to speak, I am only a boy.”

“Only” is an interesting little four letter word. It can be purely descriptive, so that when I say “I ate only one kind of dessert last night,” you know that no matter how tempting all the other desserts were, I picked a single one. If I tell you that I am an only child, you know that my parents had no other children; that I have no siblings. Or if I say I live only 5 minutes from the mall, you have a good idea of my proximity to Macy’s. When Jesus tells the disciples, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him,” he is saying “get your priorities straight,” that God uniquely is worthy of worship. Used in those ways “only” is a very helpful little word.

But that’s not how Jeremiah was using the word when he responded to God’s call. No, he said “I am only a boy,” and he didn’t mean that the word “boy” summed up the totality of who he is. He used the word “only” to mean “merely.” “I am “merely” a boy, God; I’m not good enough for your lofty purposes; I’m not old enough; I’m not capable enough to do your will. “Only” used in this sense isn’t descriptive, it’s destructive because it places a limit on something and it’s dismissive because it implies a lack of value or importance.

I finished yesterday morning teaching the four week lay speaking class at Hartwell. We had nine members in the class; our own Linda Burchfield was one of them. And it was interesting to observe the anxiety in these gifted people as they prepared to present their 5 minute meditations or mini-sermons each week to the group. “Do I have to?” “You go first;” “I’m not good at this; I haven’t done much speaking.” Yesterday one man said to me, “I’m only a country boy, not much education, joined the marines right out of high school.”

Do you ever wonder how many times you devalue yourself or someone else. Have you ever said or heard someone else say, “What can I do, I’m only one person?” “I’m very busy; I only have a few hours to give.” “I’m not rich you know, I only have a few dollars.” “I can’t do what I used to do; I’m only an old person now.” “She didn’t go far in school; she only has a basic education.” “He can’t read music; he only sings by ear.” “She’s new in town; only been here ten years.” You name it, I’ll bet everyone of us has used the “only” designation more than once to doubt ours or someone else’s abilities or worthiness.

Whole segments of our society can become marginalized, dehumanized, when we used the word “only” in this sense. “Only” becomes a profane word because we’re using it to draw lines, to demarcate insiders and outsiders, good from bad, worthy from unworthy, adequate from inadequate; just like us from outsiders and strangers.

I was reminded of that yesterday morning when I read Rabbi Gerson's column in the newspaper. He recounted a conversation with a friend recently widowed, who said, "now when I go to a restaurant, by necessity by myself, it's so different than it used to be. Most of the time they stick me at a cramped corner table away from the main area where couples and families are happy eating." Can't you just hear the waiter thinking to himself, "He's only a single person – stick him away at the back of the room; don't waste a good table on him." And Rabbi Gerson comments, "we have an uncanny tendency to exclude those who do not fit into the 'regular mode' of society. . . . we forget the widow or widower after the death of the spouse . . . we do the same thing to divorced or single people . . . we often exclude the handicapped too . . . and do not reach out enough to include these – and others – who are outside that mode and often in pain." ("Remember to Love Those Who are Least Loved," ABH, August 25, 2007).

That's what was going on that day in the synagogue when Jesus saw someone in pain whom no one else could see. She was only a crippled woman, bent over for 18 years, unable to look up to see the sunshine, or to see the faces of her family, if there was a family, or friends, if she still had any friends. Jesus walked over and healed her right then and there. She was important enough to him to interrupt what he was doing to take care of her needs immediately.

This of course angered the Pharisees because in their minds, it was the Sabbath, and keeping the laws for the Sabbath were much more important than the well-being of this woman. After all – she was only a woman, and a damaged one at that. Now, if she'd been a thirsty cow that needed a drink or a farm animal that was stuck in a ditch, -- well, that would have been different. According to the laws, the cow could be led to water; the animal could be assisted from the ditch because they were valuable property! But her! Why the fuss? Why bother?.

But Jesus doesn't see her that way – he may not have known her name, whether it was Miriam, or Sarah, or Esther – but that didn't matter because he calls her by a new name, one that she surely had long ago forgotten was hers. He calls her "daughter of Abraham." To us maybe that doesn't mean much, but in that day and age, it would have immediately called to mind Father Abraham – the father of Israel, the one who answered God's call, the one to whom the promise was given. – a promise to make of Abraham a great nation, a nation through which all the nations of the world would be blessed.

This woman is a daughter of Abraham, Jesus says. She is heir to all the blessings of God. And as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is not just a sad victim – *only* a nameless woman with a bent back – she is a daughter of Abraham, an inheritor of the promises, a part of God's great salvation of the world.

God said to Jeremiah, "Do not say 'I am only a boy,'" and then touched the boy's lips. Jesus told the crippled woman, "You are set free from your ailment," and laid his hands on her. Both were cured of the things that were holding them back. Both were affirmed to be valuable, necessary, worthy in God's eyes.

The world is forever wanting to call us names. Republicans do it to Democrats and vice versa. Christians do it to Muslims who do it to Jews. Employers can do it to employees; teachers to students; doctors with patients. It can happen anywhere any time. Even, if we're not careful, with those we love the most. Parents, do you hear how you speak to your children, and children – especially adult children -- do you hear how you speak to your parents? Husbands, wives, do you hear how you speak to your spouse? Sometimes it doesn't take much to cause us to begin feeling like an "only" – not deserving of much, not capable of much. Maybe you can remember a time when you felt like an "only." Maybe you feel that way today. We all have those times in our lives. I've shared with some of you before that there was a time in my life,

maybe 20 years ago now, when I was feeling very “only.”—very inadequate, very devalued, very insignificant. And a church friend of mine, Francine Kohler, sat and talked with me one afternoon in a loving and compassionate way, and she gave me a little piece of paper on which she had written, “You are a unique and unrepeatable miracle of God.” – a modern day equivalent, I guess of “you are a daughter of Abraham.” And for months, I was gradually healed from being a bent over woman, as I kept that piece of paper close by, and read its words every day, and said them to myself over and over again. And by golly, Francine was right! I am a unique and unrepeatable miracle of God. And you know what? So are you! And so is everyone else we meet outside these doors. We are all sons and daughters of Abraham, heirs of the promise, beloved in God’s eyes. And we must never, ever forget it!

Rev. Lisa Caine  
Oconee St. UMC  
Athens, GA