

Pentecost 14 – C (2019)
Psalm 71: Selected verses
Jeremiah 1:4-10

Every once in a while, network television takes a risk -- not very often, but it does happen.

One of the networks took a risk some years back. Some said the new series would never work, because of the location in which it was set. No matter that this particular setting exists in every American town, large or small -- still, the executives worried. They worried that the public would be offended.

The setting was a bar. The series, *Cheers*, almost didn't make it to the airwaves. Yet the network took the risk -- and ended up with a blockbuster success.

What is it that makes *Cheers* so endearing? It's not the setting -- as risky as that was for the network. We all know that real bars have little resemblance to Sam Malone's Boston watering hole. In *Cheers* the drunks are funny and endearing -- not loud and obnoxious. And the regulars -- Cliff, the aging, lovelorn postal worker; Frasier, the oddball psychiatrist; and the ubiquitous Norm, anchoring his corner of the bar like the Rock of Gibraltar -- all seem to live in the place, yet show no symptoms of alcoholism.

The feature that makes *Cheers* so appealing is the chemistry among these characters, the interplay of their personalities. Beyond that, these characters share a genuine sense of community. They actually care for each other. Unlike most barroom friendships, these characters know each other well -- better, it seems, in some cases, than their own family members know them. You could even say they love each other.

It's in the warm tones of the *Cheers* theme song that you can discover the true secret of the series' appeal: "You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same; you wanna be where everybody knows your name."

What *Cheers* is peddling is community. If you can suspend your disbelief long enough to accept the premise that community that genuine really exists in a bar, you can enjoy the show. The television writers have touched a universal chord that resonates within the breast of each one of us -- the desire to know and be known.

Today's Old Testament lesson tells of a man whose formative life experience is being known. The man is Jeremiah, the prophet. God knows him. God loves him. God has a purpose for his life.

One of the things that I find most appealing in the Wesleyan tradition is its ideas of grace: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, and one of those describes perfectly the way God works with Jeremiah. It is that idea of *prevenient grace*. Prevenient grace is grace that comes before -- before anything you or I can do or even think about doing. Before Jeremiah even knows that there is such a being as God, God already knows Jeremiah personally. And it's not just in the life of Jeremiah

that we hear about that kind of grace, the apostle Paul testifies to this same prenatal knowledge and appointment by God as he describes his own call:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles . . . (Galatians 1:15)

That's why we prayed those verses from Psalm 71 today, "Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb." God knew us and planned on us before ever forming us. Verse 5 in our reading from Jeremiah says the same thing, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you..." There is an amazing comfort in those words from the opening of the Book of the prophet Jeremiah. It is both comfort and challenge.

Jeremiah is being called to be a prophet — a mouthpiece of God. His call is specific to the way God made him (v. 5) and is intended for the situation in which God has placed him (vv. 7, 10).

Similarly, God calls each of us to become who he made us to be on behalf of those he has called us to impact. There is a personal nature to our relationship with God. God's calling interacts first with how he has wired us. Our gifts. Passions. Talents. But this calling then speaks out to others — extending kingdom values to people in our circles of influence.

In saying that calling is personal, we also mean that it's unique to each of us. We aren't supposed to read Jeremiah's calling and do what he was supposed to do. We're supposed to read it and do what *we* are supposed to do.

We aren't all called to be Jeremiah.

God's call is personal to each of us.

We are not necessarily talking about careers, though God does sometimes direct us to certain ones. Rather, we are talking about being willing to serve in the places that the circumstances of our lives and the invitation of God puts us. The key word is *willing*. Willing.

Now when we talk about being willing to respond to God's challenges, what comes to your mind? Do you think that means you will be asked to become a missionary to Uganda, a parent to autistic children, a servant in children's ministry, sufferer of chronic pain or a pastor or a Lay Speaker or even a martyr?

That's possible, but more likely it means that you will have a sense that God desires something of you *in the places you already frequent*. You are challenged to have the same kind of feeling about your neighborhood, school, workplace, committees, clubs and other groups that missionaries have about the locations where they work. You are challenged to believe that as God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, so He has appointed you to the places where you go each day.

Some of us, most of us, all of us, at one time or another will be challenged to live out and maintain our faithfulness in difficult situations. We will be called to

persevere and answer God's call throughout our lifetimes – from birth to death. As long as we live, we are going to face what Martin Luther calls a "flood of mortal ills." It's not one of ours, but our Lutheran brothers and sisters offer us a great hymn as we go through our lives in the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." We will still experience personal attacks, betrayals, failures, illnesses, and the difficulties that come with advancing age. But God acts as a helper amid the "flood of mortal ills," one who supports us and shields us from complete annihilation.

I've heard it often enough in my ministry, but it's like the lady in her 100s once commented to a visitor, "I don't know why I am allowed to live so long. I am here in this nursing home and not worth anything anymore." Her visitor noticed her Bible, her Upper Room devotional, and noted that her pastor had recently been there. That visitor replied, "You talk about how the workers here talk and it is evident they do not have faith in Jesus. Maybe that is why you are here, that they see your faith as your read you devotions daily and confidently live not fearing death but looking forward to the day Jesus welcomes you home."

"Oh," was her then enlightened response. It made sense now, even to her, how precious her life was and how important the expression of our faith can be. Everyone can be an example of faith. God didn't accept Jeremiah's excuses and does not accept ours either.

There is an old, Dutch story about a little boy named Peter who saved all of Holland. Holland floods easily, and is protected by flooding by a system of walls known as dikes. According to legend, one day little Peter was walking along one of these walls and noticed a leak. Water was flowing in through a small crack, about the size of his finger. Peter wanted to go and find help, but he knew that, if left unchecked, the water leaking through the dike could weaken the wall until it collapsed. Having nothing with him to stop the leak, Peter put his finger into the hole. He sat there all night, keeping the water inside the dike. In the morning, the townspeople found him. Little Peter, thanks to his quick thinking, saved the whole town. He was just a boy, but his action saved many.

Instead of clinging to the insecurity of being an "only," we need to take hold of the power that our status as "one" reveals. Try replacing the defeatist four-syllable message "I am only" with a different four-syllable mantra: "I am the one." One is enough for God.

- Only one person
- Only one team
- Only one congregation
- Only one family
- Only one town
- Only one state
- Only one nation

- Only one continent
- Only one world.

In God's infinite wisdom, and with God's infinite power, God has chosen you, only you, as the only one who can stand as a particular kind of witness, perform a unique kind of ministry, give a distinct shape to Christ's body here on earth. You are the only one God chooses for this task. Only you can do God's work as only you can do it. Together with every member of the body of Christ, we make up a community and a church of "onlys."

Our faith life is a partnership with each other and with God. When God calls Jeremiah, he doesn't leave him alone to accomplish that calling.

"You shall go to all to whom I send you" (v. 7).

"You shall speak whatever I command" (v. 7).

"I am with you" (v. 8).

"I have put **my** words in your mouth" (v. 9).

God's calling is always the invitation to partner with him in a place where his Spirit is already at work.

The apostle Paul models this in describing the preaching he was called to do. It wasn't a human effort but a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Corinthians 2:4). What was true for Paul is true of real preaching today. And what is true in the pulpit is just as true for the calling of every person in its audience.

Whatever God calls people to is the thing he intends to empower them to accomplish. This means we aren't alone in our calling. We aren't solely responsible for the results of what we are called to. We don't claim the credit for those results.

We find God at work around us and join him in what he might do through us. That is the partnership of our calling.

Trust in God and hope in God's grace and promises and presence are a given in our reading from Jeremiah and the main theme in our praying of Psalm 71 today. "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you" (Psalm 71:5-6, NRSV). In the face of distress, when everything in life seems to be against him, the psalmist conveys utter trust in God. The psalmist's words are the antidote to the apostasy that Jeremiah speaks against. Here is an example of a believer with unfailing faith and hope in the Lord. "My praise is continually of you" (verse 6).

So, what is it with God's help and God's grace that God is calling you to do? If you want to know what God expects of your tomorrows, look at what God has done with your yesterdays. May God grant us eyes to see how we have been prepared, ears to hear the task that is proposed, and then the faith to realize that God will preserve us for the completion of that task. May God give us each one a little of Jeremiah.