

A Case of the Onlys

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Jeremiah 1: 4-10

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I believe we all have preconceived notions about people, don't you? Even before we really get to know a person we all seem to have an idea of what that person is like.

Here is a test. What kind of person comes to your mind when you think of an "only child?" Maybe you think of a person that is prone to be self-motivated, bright, independent, a natural leader, and generally mature beyond their years.

Or, on the other hand, maybe you picture in your mind an only child as being spoiled, self-centered, privileged and always seeking attention and being selfish. My youngest son admitted to me once that he thought the saying was he or she is a "lonely child." I guess we know what *his* preconceived notion was!

Perhaps you grew up as an "only." In reality, those who grow up as onlys are probably just as apt to be any or all of those characteristics I just mentioned as any of us.

In our own ways, we are all onlys, though, aren't we? No matter how many brothers or sisters you had to share a bedroom with or wear their hand-me-downs, everyone grew up as an individual with a unique history and unique experiences. That uniqueness is what makes us into the people we are today.

It is this only-ness that gives us our unique sense of self, and yet can also strand us in a sea of only-ness. Sometimes we seem to be a vast sea of onlys—all standing side by side, but not quite willing to reach out and connect to the one next to us, which would unite us and make a community.

Living in the nation that we do, our independence and autonomy, our ability and our striving to be a force of one is normally viewed as a positive thing. But, isn't it also this same characteristic of self that we fall back on when we want to make an excuse or whine about something? "I'm only one person, or I'm only a housewife, or I'm only a teacher or a nurse," or whatever you only are.

That is certainly what Jeremiah did when God called him to be a prophet to the nations. When Jeremiah was suddenly confronted with a mission from God to deliver his message, Jeremiah succumbed to a case of the onlys. "I'm only a boy," Jeremiah replied. "Surely you can't mean *me!*"

Well, as you might guess, this excuse didn't and doesn't hold water with God. God has heard that whine many times before. Moses told God—I'm only a shepherd—and I stutter. Saul told David, that he couldn't go out there and take on Goliath—you're only a boy! The disciples when told by Jesus to go feed the multitude, protested: We only have five loaves and 2 fish. In our Gospel reading that Edie read today, we heard the people of Nazareth saying, "isn't this Joseph's son? He's only a carpenter."

You know these stories, and you know those cases of the onlys just don't work with God, do they? God calls the onlys a lot. God tends to choose them on purpose. I wonder why that is?

God doesn't get mixed up and dial the wrong number when calling us to do something. God wasn't trying to reach somebody else and just settled on the boy Jeremiah when he called him.

God knows us, and this is your message for today--when God calls an only, when God calls you—and when you really listen to God and respond, God's strength is there with you, and God's strength is always enough for whatever God has called us to do. Remember—we do not choose God, God chooses us.

Parker Palmer is one of my favorite authors and in one of his books, *Let Your Life Speak*, he talks about the two-fold nature of a call. He says it is first about who you are. God knows us—the beginning verses in our Jeremiah text for today said "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." God has our calls planned out for us from **the** very beginning of our existence. Hearing a call from God is first getting in touch with who we are and for what purpose God created us.

“God doesn’t ask us to conform to some abstract norm for the ideal self. God asks us only to honor our created nature, which means our limits as well as our potentials.”¹

Parker says the second part of a call from God is for us to respond—our call is given to us to make a difference in other people’s lives. God needs us. That is sometimes hard to get our head around, I know.

I believe God calls us to do God’s work here on earth, and as someone I read once said, “Without God, we can’t. Without us, God won’t.” God needs us as disciples and evangelists in this world. This two-fold nature of call is where Parker came up with the title for his book, *Let Your Life Speak*.

Your life, as God created it, and speak—to the world. It’s your life that God has created—for a purpose, unique, with special talents, skills, gifts and abilities. That is a gift God has given us. Now, we must speak.

As Christians, we have each been called to bear witness to the greatest gift of love, the greatest sacrifice for our sake that the world has ever known. Like Jeremiah, we have been called to give the message of the Good News to a world that is either so self-centered it refuses to hear the gospel, or to a world that is at times downright hostile to the vision of redemption that is offered through Jesus Christ.

When we become aware of the size of the mission God is calling each of us to undertake, I’m afraid a lot of us come down with a bad case of those “onlys,” which can include I’m only human, or only ordinary, only a boy or a girl, only old, only half-up-to-it, only an amateur, only have a few years left, only this or only that.

Fear soon becomes part of our make up, and fear holds us back from speaking out—about our lives, about God, and about what we believe. There is comfort to be found, though. “God’s calling is always the invitation to partner with God in a place where God’s Spirit is already at work. Whatever God calls you to do is the thing he intends to empower you to accomplish. This means we are

¹ Palmer, Parker, J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pg. 50.

not alone in our calling. We aren't solely responsible for the results, and we can't claim the credit for the results."²

Verse 8 of our lesson today has God saying, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." "Fear not" is an offer of salvation and a promise of protection. At the heart of Jeremiah's call and of the call of each and every one of you, is the Twenty-third Psalm all over again. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." That means **God** will shadow us, not death. That is God's promise to Jeremiah and to each of us as well."³

"Our call to serve the God who shadows us is to speak a word of truth in our daily life--"⁴ To let our life speak. This calling will never be easy if it is the calling of God. Just like the visions I spoke about a couple of weeks ago—they seem darn near impossible.

However, remember that we are all known and all beloved by God. We are all called by God to specific tasks, regardless of our circumstances. God will supply everything we need to fulfill our calling. And when we live our calling by God, it will be good for us, but it will also be good for the world and all of God's people.

Let us pray: Loving God, Creator of our lives, make us aware of the life which you are calling us to live and give us the courage to live them. Amen.

² Homiletics Online. "Did you Mean . . .?" 1/31/2010.

³ George H. Martin, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 294.

⁴ Ibid.