



Am I Good Enough?



A Sermon By
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February 3, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

This Christmas, I received Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*, as a gift. I quickly devoured the 421-page autobiography. Michelle Obama's reflections on her life from childhood in Chicago's southside to First Lady of the United States was captivating. But perhaps what struck me most was a single question that kept popping up throughout the book. It was a question Michelle asked herself again and again throughout the various stages of her life, "Am I good enough?"

She struggled with the question as a child, striving to earn gold stars in kindergarten. The question plagued her mind as a teenager attending private school outside of her neighborhood. And it didn't go away when she grew up. As a college student at Princeton University, a questioning chorus of, "Am I good enough?" echoed in her mind. It stayed with her as a young lawyer at a high-rise law firm in Chicago. And even when she entered the Whitehouse as First Lady and became one of the most influential and admired women in the country, the old question reared its head again. Am I good enough?

The question is one that even the most confident of us grapple with from time to time. Doubts creep in on us. We second guess our worth. We're fretful, apprehensive even. And it's not just us. This question seems to be a hallmark of the human psyche from time immemorial. Take, for example, the prophet Jeremiah, the focus of our first reading today. Here is a person who questioned his worth not only privately, but before God.

When the story begins, God appears to Jeremiah, who at the time was quite young. God frames the conversation with words of comfort, reminding Jeremiah that God was with him from the beginning of his conception. God reassures Jeremiah that God's knows him intimately. Then, God appoints the young Jeremiah to be a prophet.

Flash back 600 years (give or take): Terrified by the sight of God's fiery presence at Sinai and afraid they could not survive the sound of God's voice, the Israelites ask God for an intermediary who would protect them and speak God's word to them (Deut. 18:16). These mediators were later called prophets. They were tasked with speaking God's word to the people, especially when the people had fallen away from God. Moses was such a prophet. So were Gideon and Isaiah. God promised to raise up other prophets. Jeremiah, a faithful Jew, knew this and had some concept of what the role of prophet entailed. It would not be a glamorous vocation, nor an easy one. And so, when we listen to his story today, we can almost hear the question rumble through the young man's mind, "Am I good enough?"

It becomes clear that Jeremiah thinks the answer to that questions is no. He doesn't think he is good enough to be God's prophet. After receiving the commission from God, Jeremiah says, "Ah, Lord God!" This phrase is used as a complaint against God in scripture, throughout the books of Jeremiah, Joshua, and Ezekiel, it crops up time and time again. In this instance, Jeremiah complains against God, begging off the prophetic role because he thinks he is not good enough to fill it. He states his youth and lack of rhetorical skills as reasons for his unworthiness.

But God will have none of that. God reminds Jeremiah that he is in fact good enough, despite his doubts. Jeremiah was good enough because he was formed by God, known by God, consecrated by God, and appointed by God. God was with him and God loved him. And that was enough. Jeremiah was good enough.

Sometimes, we, like Jeremiah question our own worthiness. And sometimes, our worthiness, is questioned by others, even those closest to us. Our gospel text today explores such an occasion in the life of Jesus. In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus comes face to face with the people of his hometown. One minute they are in awe of him, but the moment he offers challenging words, words that speak of God's grace extended to outsiders, his hometown neighbors are filled with rage against him. They chase him out of the synagogue and try to throw him off of a cliff! Not only do they question Jesus' value as Messiah, but also the value of his life. Regardless of what Jesus thought of his worthiness, the people of Nazareth ran hot and cold. One moment, Jesus was good enough, and the next, he wasn't.

At times it can feel like that in our lives too. Like Jesus, in this gospel story, we too, receive mixed messages from outside forces - culture, society, neighbors, friends, family - implying one moment that we're good enough, and the next, that we're not. Our favor in the world can switch at a moment's notice based on our actions or inactions, our words or our silence. And when that happens, I hope you will remember that God allowed Jesus to walk through the midst of the crowd and go on his way. God carried him through the hate and the rage of others. And what God did for Jesus, God will do for us. God will carry us through the judgments of others.

And as with Jeremiah, when our own internal forces - our doubts and fears, our shortcomings and insecurities - impact our understanding of self-worth, remember God's words to Jeremiah. God wanted Jeremiah to know that he was wrapped in God's love. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you...". Even before he ever drew a breath, God knew Jeremiah. And even before we took a breath, God knew us, and God loved us. God didn't let Jeremiah diminish himself. "Do not say, 'I am only...'" says God to the prophet. Can we hear God say the same to us? Do not say, you are only this or only that. Do not diminish your worth or belittle yourself. You are valued.

The best way to value ourselves is to remember, and bask in, who God says we are and how much God values us. If we stay grounded there in that Great Love, it becomes less and less likely that we will devalue ourselves or allow others to do so. But, trusting that God loves us, trusting that we are good enough, simply because we are who we are, is not easy.

Our world, like Jeremiah and Jesus', and like Michelle Obama's, is filled with voices, external and internal, that shout: You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody. But you're not. I'm not. You are good. You are beautiful. You have so much worth. You are matter. You are a beloved child of God - God, who formed you in the womb, who knew you and who consecrated you. You are good enough, and then some.

Theologian and author Henri Nouwen said, "We are beloved children of God. One of the greatest spiritual tasks we have is to claim that identity and to live a life based in that knowledge." Friends, you are God's very own. You are God's own beloved. May the One who loved you at your beginning equip you with grace to receive the truth of your belovedness, to rest in it, and then to live it out this day and always. May you know and feel that God's answer to your internal question, "Am I good enough?" is yes, you are. Amen.