

You Can't Say No To God!

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 22, 2010)

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (TEV) ⁴The LORD said to me, ⁵“I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.”

⁶I answered, “Sovereign LORD, I don't know how to speak; I am too young.”

⁷But the LORD said to me, “Do not say that you are too young, but go to the people I send you to, and tell them everything I command you to say. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you. I, the LORD, have spoken!”

⁹Then the LORD reached out, touched my lips, and said to me, “Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak. ¹⁰Today I give you authority over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Luke 13:10-17 ¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “**Woman, you are set free from your ailment.**” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “**You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?**” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah said he couldn't do it because he was too young. This was typical of many of the prophets who tried to give God an excuse when God called them. In Exodus, chapter 4, we read about Moses' excuses. He first said, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent. I am slow of speech and of tongue.” God promised to “be with his mouth.” Moses had other excuses, but each time God had an answer, until Moses protested, “Oh, my Lord, I pray, send some other person.” You probably remember that God didn't accept Moses' excuses and did not grant this request. Jonah used a more radical response – he tried to run away. God told him to go to Ninevah, so he went down to the seaport and got on a ship heading the opposite direction – and you remember the rest of that story. Jeremiah didn't run away, but he did protest to God that he didn't want the job. His excuse was similar to what Moses had said – he claimed he had no skill as a public speaker. And furthermore, Jeremiah protested, I am too young. Now with that in mind, God's response takes on a bit of humor. In essence, God says to Jeremiah, “Young, you think you are too young?” Listen, I knew you from **before** you were a child. Before you were even born, I consecrated you and appointed you to be a prophet! In other words, you are never too young, and in fact, there are no excuses. There is not a single excuse that is acceptable to God. You can claim you have a speech impediment, like Moses, or that you are too young, like Jeremiah, or maybe too old – I have heard that excuse many times, or you may even try to run away from God, like Jonah, but there is no acceptable excuse. When God calls you, you cannot refuse!

Our Gospel lesson is another story of how two people responded to God. There was a woman who was bent over, and Jesus healed her. There is a lot of interesting imagery in this miracle story. For example, the word for “bent over” is the same word applied to one carrying a heavy load. I can still remember growing up on the farm, how I would carry sacks of feed to our chickens, ducks and cattle. I could carry a bag of feed that weighed 150 lbs on my back – but not standing straight. The weight was so heavy that the only way I could carry it was to bend over. In the same way, this woman was bent over, as if carrying a tremendous burden, or maybe she was bent over, as a slave, carrying burdens for the master. Or there might even be an allegorical meaning for “bent over,” such as one who has been abused, or oppressed, or even emotionally drained. In other words, today we might say that she was worn down by the worries and cares of daily life.

Notice in the Gospel story, she didn't even come to Jesus to ask for help. Jesus saw her, and called her, and spoke to her before we even hear a word about the woman doing anything. Here already we see a wonderful

image – God coming to us, as he did to the woman, before we call on God, before we are ready, perhaps even before we want God to help us. And then Jesus healed her, or as the Scripture says, he “freed her from her infirmity.” Whatever it was that was troubling this woman – illness, a burden from society, whatever, Jesus set her free. Again, Luke records that Jesus used an interesting word, the same word that would be used for untying an animal or releasing an ox or horse from a yoke or harness. The woman was deeply afflicted, and before she could even ask, Jesus set her free from whatever it was that troubled her. And immediately she was made straight, and praised God. Again, there is a wonderful image – those whom God touches are lifted up, made straight. Burdens are lifted, and as a result, we are lifted up. And our response should be to praise God, just as the woman began praising God.

In contrast to the woman who was healed, we have the response of the leader of the Synagogue. I would like to suggest that he also was bent over with a heavy burden – but his burden was the weight of rules and regulations and tradition. You can almost hear him saying, “There is a time and place for everything, including God. We have a decent and orderly service here in our synagogue Jesus should not be coming in and disrupting the flow of things.” Which reminds me of the story of the visitor in a very proper church. During the sermon he was accustomed to shouting “Amen” and so as a visitor, he did the same. The first time, everyone turned and looked at him in astonishment. They never did this in their worship, and it was almost shocking. The second time he shouted Amen, a few children giggled, some people were embarrassed. And the third time one of the ushers went over and asked him to keep quiet. He responded that he couldn’t help it, he “had religion” to which the usher responded – well we don’t have religion in here!

Now I am not suggesting that we should begin the practice of shouting Amen. That goes against the grain of our quiet German pietism. But I am suggesting that you should always be ready to respond to God, to give God the credit, yes, and even to praise God! God in Christ does come to you, and does set you free from your burdens. God will lift you up – how will you respond?

Some people refuse to see God at work in the world around them. The beauty of a sunset just “happens” or “is a result of high levels of humidity and pollution in the air!” Healing is the result of good medicine, good doctors, or maybe good luck. Peace and prosperity, they say, come to a land because of good leaders, or good economic policies. On the other hand, some of us can see through the pollution, the good luck, and even the good leaders, and we can see the Hand of God at work. If you can see the Hand of God, if you can feel his touch, be lifted up! Straighten up! Let go of the burden, and walk upright with God.

I guess the woman could have also argued and refused to listen to Jesus. Can you imagine that response? Jesus would have said, “Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.” And she would have stayed bent over, saying, “Oh, Jesus, I have been this way so long, I’d rather not change now. If I stand up, nobody will pity me any more. They are liable to not pay any attention to me here in the synagogue. My whole life has been one of misery and difficulty. How can you expect me to straighten up now, after all those people have been pushing me down for so long? Can’t you just let well enough alone, Jesus?”

“That image of saying no to Jesus seems so wrong – maybe it is hard for you to even imagine it. So why do we do it? Why do we sometimes refuse God or say “no, thank you” to Jesus? God presents us with opportunities to minister to others. And we prefer not to get involved. God calls us into church to worship Him, to hear His Word, to be lifted up in Christian fellowship, and the majority of our nation (and our congregation) is not found in church on an average Sunday. God gives us his Son, who died on a cross, who permitted his body to be broken for us, and yet, so many don’t bother to come and receive His body in Holy Communion. God lifts our burdens from us, is willing to bear our pain, but so many times, we would rather bear it ourselves. Maybe we want to prove our strength, or our endurance. Maybe we are like some folks I have known who simply are not happy unless they are miserable. Or maybe we want to just keep things as they are.

Maybe you are not ready, maybe you think the time is not appropriate. But God is speaking to you, “Woman (or man), you are freed from your burden.” “Jeremiah, go and proclaim to the nations.” “Jonah, go to Ninevah!”

Listen for God’s voice speaking to you, and don’t even try to say no to God! Amen.