

“Don’t Say Only...”
Psalm 8; Jeremiah 1: 4-10
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ellis B. Johnson
Sunday, March 9, 2008

I want to say, again, how delighted we are to have the scouts with us today and to have Luke and Elizabeth as our readers in the service. It also affords us the opportunity to express our admiration and appreciation to those of you who, as adults, give your time to working with young people in scouting, athletics, church school and other worthwhile endeavors. And that, of course, reminds me of a story! Martin E. Marty, a contemporary church historian from the University of Chicago about two decades ago, discovered a 1921 church bulletin from the Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan. The reason that was so significant is that the pastor was a young man by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr who would later become the single most influential American born theologian of the twentieth century. On the bulletin listed as co-director of the “Young People’s Department” is “Rev. R. Niebuhr”, and in finer print a few lines below, it reads, “Boy Scout Troop, No. 97: R. Niebuhr, Scoutmaster.” Marty, whose language is often colorful, said those were “the ministerial equivalent of bed pan duty for doctors”, but suddenly budding theologians from all over the country started volunteering as scout masters. So for those of you who work with scouting programs without any idea of who Reinhold Niebuhr was are to be commended for being ahead of your times. And I want to preach especially to our youth this morning with the hope that those of us who are a little older might snag something helpful.

I read recently about a child who was born in Port Huron, Michigan quite some time ago. He was enrolled in school at the usual age but withdrew three months later. School officials considered him to be “backward”. His IQ was estimated to be about 80. He was also a sickly child: scarlet fever and respiratory infection kept him from going back to school for another two years. He was quite deaf and his emotional health was poor – he was stubborn and withdrawn. But he did like mechanical things. Unfortunately, he also liked to play with fire – he accidentally burned down his father’s barn. Despite his severe limitations – limitations that would make most people give up on a child, he decided he’d like to be either a railroad mechanic or a scientist. Port Huron now is quite proud to let the world know this boy grew up there. His name is Thomas Alva Edison – as you may very well know.

How do we more fully tap the powers and possibilities the creator has placed within each of us? What holds us back from becoming what we are truly intended to be? Surely most of us are held back more by attitude than by ability. The ancient Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah, is a case in point. The lesson which Elizabeth read tells of an overwhelming sense of the call of God which comes to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah’s response may sound painfully familiar to us. “But, Lord”, Jeremiah said, “I don’t know how to speak.” (“Survey says” number one fear –

fear of public speaking.) I'm sure that part of Jeremiah's fear stems from the knowledge that as a prophet, he would be called on to proclaim a message that would be difficult for his people to hear and it would anger them. It was essentially, "Because you have mistreated the poor in your midst, God will send your enemy to conquer you and take you into exile This is God's judgment upon you." As Jeremiah contemplates that awesome responsibility, he speaks the words that destroy potential: "I am only...!" It is our "I am only's" that stop us in our tracks and rob us of our potential. For Jeremiah, it is "I am only a youth". For another, it might be, "I am only a senior citizen, or some other "I am only". A generation ago, one might even have heard, "I am only a women" – one doesn't hear that one very often these days. A man attending a business conference was seated next to a pleasant matronly woman who reminded him a little of his mother. Trying to make polite conversation with one whom he thought might be uncomfortable in such a high-powered setting, he asked her what she did for a hobby. She said, "I talk to my plants." "Oh that's nice," he said; figuring she was a bit off center – until later in the evening she was introduced as the keynote speaker, and he learned that the plants she talks to are her plant in Chicago, her plant in Detroit, and her plant in LA! Most of our "I am only's..." are just as powerless as that!

In Psalm 8, which was read this morning, the Psalmist marvels that the God of majesty and power creates humans "only a little lower than God". It is the Psalmist's version of Genesis I, that everyone of us is "created in the image of God." What does that mean?! We think of "image" as visual, but God is spirit – we certainly don't "look like" God. No, it means that we are created for relationship- for relationship with one another, and, first and foremost, for relationship with God. (The poet, James Weldon Johnson, has God say to himself, on the eve of creation, "I'm lonely; I'll make me a man." (I'll make me a human".)

This is so terribly important, young people. It means that everyone you meet has an invisible sign on their forehead which reads: "Made in the image of God." Sometimes it's hard to see- when you meet someone on the street, or in school, or in prison, or on an Alzheimer's unit, but it's always there. And part of what life is about is learning to see it on everyone's forehead. And even more importantly, remembering that it's there on your forehead, as well – that whatever else you are, you are "made in the image of God." Never forget that , no matter how hopeless things may seem, there is always hope because we are created for relationship with God! God reminds Jeremiah, when Jeremiah is feeling most inadequate, of that relationship!

God says to the youthful Jeremiah, "Don't say 'I am only a youth', for I am with you!" Then God puts forth his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth in a very symbolic action – symbolic of giving God's words to Jeremiah the prophet, but just perhaps it is also to cleanse Jeremiah's lips from the "I am only's..." so that he might live out more of his potential.

Have you seen the classic movie, "Good Will Hunting"? It, too, is about a youth. A young man from South Boston who is a mathematical genius – who has unimaginable potential, but who is determined to mop floors for a living, be in and out of court for fist

fights and petty theft, and in and out of relationships, because if you don't put yourself out- if you don't try- then you don't get rejected, and rejection was too painfully familiar to Will Hunting. His "I'm only" was "I'm only a kid from Southie who's been in and out of foster homes and abused more often than loved!" And God comes to Will Hunting in the form of a professor of psychology at Bunker Hill Community College, who doesn't touch his lips but his heart with acceptance and love, enabling him to risk rejection in order to love – and live out more of his God-given potential. (And while he's doing it the Psychologist learns to love again, as well.

One day in an elementary school art class the children were working in clay. One little girl did a very nice job of molding a person with wings. She held it up for everyone to see and proclaimed, "I made an angel!" Then she took her angel and quickly molded it back into a ball and asked everyone, "Okay, now what's this?" Most of the kids thought it wasn't much of anything, but one guessed, "A ball?" "Nope," she said, "It's a hiding angel."

We all have hiding angels within us just waiting to be released. We will release them, when we, like Jeremiah, are touched by God, so that we can never say, "I am only...", but "I am a child of God- known by God for something which I can do, by the power of that God who guides me to become what I am really meant to be. Let God touch your lips and your life – and change the "I am only" to "I am a child of God".