

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Feel Inadequate?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Rev. Pen Peery

February 23, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Over the past month we have been in a sermon series called “Living Our Okayest Life” where we are exploring and affirming the humanity of those whom God calls into partnership to join in God’s work in the world.

Part of the reason for this sermon series is to prepare for this year’s Willard Lecturer, Kate Bowler. Kate will be here in less than two weeks. Her lecture is called Life After Perfect.

In worship we’ve talked about Moses – who was worried about his physical imperfections that caused him to be slow of speech. We’ve talked about Elijah who felt overwhelmed. Last week, Chuck preached a marvelous sermon about the Apostle Paul.

Today our focus is on a prophet named Jeremiah. Before I read the Scripture, let us go to God in prayer and then be centered by the choir. Let us pray:

Settle our hearts and minds by your Holy Spirit, God, so that you may speak...and we might listen...and, through listening, become more aware of how you see us through the lens of Christ’s love. We ask it in faith. Amen.

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I am reading from the first chapter of Jeremiah beginning in the fourth verse. Listen with me for the word of God.

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
‘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.’

Then I said,
‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’

But the Lord said to me,
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;
and the Lord said to me,

‘See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.’

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Do you remember your first day at work? Or, maybe, the feeling you had in your gut on the night before your first day at work?

If you are a parent, do you remember that time the nurse told you that you were okay to take your first-born out of the safe, secure, medical fortress of a maternity ward and transport them, unsupervised (!), to your untested, surely less-hygenic home where there were no night nurses or buttons to press if you felt out of your depth?

Do you remember your first day of high school – when you knew that these grades would actually count? Or, maybe your first day of college, when you realized that there were a **whole lot** of other smart kids in your classes?

Do you remember walking down the aisle – or watching your soon-to-be-spouse walk down the aisle toward you?

I remember standing in this pulpit twelve-and-a-half-years-ago and preaching my first sermon in this sanctuary on today’s Scripture. I was 35-years old, with a kindergartener, 10-month-old twins, and baby on the way. The title of that sermon was “Inadequate” – but I didn’t really need a title. It was obvious.

The text says that Jeremiah’s protest to God’s call was that “he was only a boy.” I happen to think that age doesn’t have anything to do with it. One of the most human feelings in the world is to be faced with something – a task, a calling, a season in life – and not to feel adequate. I have a hunch that we’ve all been there...probably multiple times.

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I don’t know if you have noticed this about your tallest, baldest preacher, but a lot of times in sermons I spend 15 minutes or so kind of building up to the point. To be fair, my classmates and I were trained that way. It even has a name – it’s called the inductive method of preaching. We unpack the Scripture and leave clues along the way about what we preachers really want to leave you with at the end of the sermon – what we hope you will hear as “the takeaway,” before...sometimes effectively, sometimes not as effectively...landing the sermon plane in the hopes that you got the point.

This morning I’m going to invert that method – and I want to tell you the point up front:

I think it is not only human to feel inadequate.

I think it is actually a mark of wisdom.

I think when we human beings start feeling like and acting like we **are adequate**...even **more** than adequate...especially in the face of a difficult task of calling...that’s where we run into problems.

What God asked Jeremiah to do was hard. In fact, I think it is safe to say that what God asked Jeremiah to do was much harder than anything you or I are asked to do in our day-jobs. We should **thank God** that God hasn’t asked us to do what God asked of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was asked to be a prophet to the “Nations” – primarily, his nation – Judah – and to the kings of Judah. Pay attention to the verbs that God uses when giving Jeremiah his charge. God asks Jeremiah...

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*to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant*

I'm good with the last two – but it's the first four that I don't think I'd want to share in front the seat of power.

I may have told you this story before, but at my last congregation we had a Wednesday worship service. In January one year, we decided we would pick a book of the Bible and read one chapter each Wednesday. Jeremiah has 52 chapters – so on that basis, we went with it.

I don't know if you have read much of the prophet Jeremiah – but let's just say it was a bit a slog. By mid-February, attendance at Wednesday worship had noticeably declined. At the end of the year – those Super Christians who made it to the finish line felt two things: (1) empathy for what Jeremiah was asked to do on God's behalf, and (2) regret (for his sake and ours) that Jeremiah said yes in the first place.

Urgent calls to repentance.

Pronouncement of woes.

Foretelling the destruction of the Temple as God's judgment on the sins of Judah's leaders.

Predictions of exile for God's people.

Instructions for how to live in exile when that prediction came true.

All of these were in the “other duties as assigned” part of Jeremiah's job description.

Could you imagine if Jeremiah – when asked to do that – would have said, “No problem, Yahweh, sign me up!”

With whom do you think you would be more comfortable: a prophet who feels up to the job, or a prophet who expresses unease and inadequacy in the face of the job?

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Even though I preached a good game when I stood in this pulpit more than a dozen years ago and talked about being inadequate, looking back, I can see that my ego couldn't actually embrace that label. What I really wanted as a 35-year-old was to prove that I was adequate.

Far enough away from that version of myself now, I can see that mistakes I have made as a leader – and a colleague – stemmed from believing that **I** could make complex problems easy, or that **I** could charm my way into being an effective supervisor, or that **I** could craft a positive narrative that would alleviate people's worries and frustrations.

With a few years' experience and the wisdom of some bumps and bruises, what I now wish I would have done is acknowledged that some problems were just difficult, and that it's okay for some relationships just to be professional but not friendly, and that sometimes the narrative a leader needs to craft isn't that everything is going to be just fine...but that come what may, we will walk through this next season together.

Fast forward to the present.

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From what I've picked up from many of you I don't think I am alone in this, but I admit to being a little overwhelmed by the headlines about what is going on around the world and within our nation.

I share that – not as a political statement, but as a human one.

Age-old conflicts feel fragile. Some of our nation's traditions and institutions are...predictably and perhaps necessarily...changing. The structure of things, and alliances, and allegiances are shifting. The pace of these changes is rapid. Our ability to keep track of it and interpret it are made more difficult with diffuse news sources and busy lives that divide our attention.

I get the instinct to want leaders who seem to have a firm and decisive and simple answer to how to navigate these challenges and changes. I just think the world is more complicated than that...I think the challenges we face are more nuanced than that...I think it is less likely that there are solutions where someone wins and another loses, and more likely that what will work is when everyone gives a little.

Because of my faith, I find I tend to yearn for leaders who are steady more than I do those who are certain they are adequate. That may sound polyanna-ish to say...but I'm a theologian, not a politician.

Faith leads me to put my trust in the fact that God is involved in warp and woof of the history we are living and the future to which we are headed. Leaders are guides on that journey, but I hesitate to invest too much of my trust in them.

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Last November – in the midst of the presidential election – one of the campaign stickers that I saw more than I expected wasn't a candidate who had a D beside her name or an R beside his name – but was someone with an iconic mustache above his lip: Ted Lasso – 2024.

I guess a number of people just wished there were more options.

In the past few months, Lindsey and I decided to let our three middle schoolers watch the Ted Lasso series. I wouldn't exactly call this a brilliant parenting move...if you've seen the series, you know that my middle schoolers may have learned a few new vocabulary words. But in watching I was reminded of just how winsome and human a character Ted Lasso is and why people love him so.

I used to think it was because Ted was so positive...and optimistic. In what can be a bruising and cynical world, it can be nice to connect to a character who always looks at the positive and the good...who stubbornly holds out hope for the best. But when I watched the series again with my kids I saw something different. There's a lot of sadness in Ted Lasso's life. There are a lot of unrealized hopes and dreams. There are plenty of unachieved expectations.

This second go-around watching the series I realized that what makes Ted Lasso's character so winsome isn't that he is helplessly optimistic and naïve. No, it's that – after trying his best – he accepts both the beautiful and the broken parts of life with an attitude of grace and humor.

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Here's what I think: I think part of the root of feeling inadequate is that awareness of the fact that we know things might not end up like we hope...and we don't know what to do about that or how to change that or how to feel about that.

Isn't that what is intimidating about holding your first born baby? Imagining all the paths that their life might take – knowing how much responsibility you bear for helping them find a good path...but also knowing that there is so much that is out of your control? Isn't that part of the feeling of inadequacy?

And, similarly, isn't that the inadequacy of standing at the headwaters of a new job or a new career?
Or starting a new school?

Or staring down a new season of life – in marriage, at retirement, or in your role as a caregiver?

Not just that you wonder if you are qualified to do it – but to not know...or be able to fully control...how it will all end up?

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One part of why Jeremiah felt inadequate had to do with his age – but another reason had to do with the difficulty of the task...and the awareness that along the way, his job as a prophet would be to speak a word from God's word into a great variety of human situations: suffering, judgment, forgiveness, restoration, devastation, the consequence of poor choices, the grace of God that comes in ways we don't expect.

Old Testament scholar Alphonetta Wines says that, “by the end of the book it is obvious that despite his misgivings about his call, Jeremiah's 'faith was big enough and bold enough to embrace the whole tragic sense of human history and to see that God had been fully involved in it.'”

The antidote for inadequacy isn't willing ourselves to become adequate, or projecting false confidence so that others think we are adequate.

What helps us cope with our feelings of inadequacy is recognizing that in and in spite of ourselves God is involved in our lives and our world.

Near the end of her life – cut too short by a lifelong battle with lupus, the great southern author Flannery O'Connor wrote, “I can, with one eye squinted, take it all as a blessing.”

We don't live in a perfect world.

We are not perfect people.

But God's relentless love and promise is still at work...through you and through me...who are called to follow the one who came to collect and reconcile...even a broken world...to himself.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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