**THE THREE Gs**

August 21, 2016

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

14th Sunday after Pentecost

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

We’ve had a lot of entertainment watching the Olympics this week.

I’ve learned some things as I’ve watched:

1. The USA does not have to win all the gold.
2. Sometimes winning a bronze is really the most thrilling and sometimes just being there is its own reward.
3. It is important to do your best, but when you are competing with the world’s elite athletes, the competition is keen and it is a joy just to be among them.
4. Angry, racist or irrational Tweets don’t come back to haunt you – they haunt you immediately.
5. Great Britain’s Mo Farrah taught us that even if you fall, and we sometimes will, you can still get up and run. He crossed the men’s 5000-meter race first.
6. Age can be an advantage - Kristin Armstrong in women’s cycling, at the age of 43, won her third consecutive gold medal in the time trial. Kerri Walsh-Jennings, at the age of 38, won her fourth medal in her fourth Olympic games (three golds and one bronze). Sailor Santiago Lange from Argentina, at the age of 54, won a gold this year in his sixth Olympics. Even the 22-year-old Aly Raisman, 31-year-old Michael Phelps and 29-year-old Usain Bolt, who are considered “old” for their respective sports.
7. Stereotypes do not consistently define us. Lots of people couldn’t believe how significant the name Simone would become. I normally think about Tony Simone, who is my HVAC guy and does an inspection on my furnace every fall. But this is a first name – like Simone Biles or Simone Manuel – I think that Simone will become a popular baby name this year.
8. People of different races can make a great team and inclusion can break through barriers – The Women’s Gymnastics team is surely evidence of that.
9. Ethiopian runner Etenesh Diro showed her resilience when she was brought down and forced to race with only one shoe during the Olympic trials and yet qualified for the final of the 3,000-meter steeplechase.
10. Watching The South Pacific Island of Fiji win its first Olympic medal ever beating Great Britain with a 43-7 victory in rugby.
11. Bahamas runner Shaunae Miller had a victory over incredible medalist, Allyson Felix from the US when she dove across the finish line during the women’s 400-meter race. Allyson Felix was gracious and still won gold medals.
12. It was sad to see the Williams sisters leave the tennis events early, but what a joy to watch Monica Puig be the first woman ever to win a medal ever for Puerto Rico.

David Boudia and Steele Johnson qualified for the Rio Olympics after the 10-meter platform finals of the diving trials on Thursday. However, there is something more important to the athletes than the Olympics: their relationship with Jesus Christ. This week Team USA Facebook page uploaded a video of this duo where they spoke openly about their faith.

“It’s cool because this is exciting, this is fun but this is not what my identity will be for the rest of my life. Yeah, I’m Steele Johnson the Olympian, but at the same time I’m here to love and serve Christ. My identity is rooted in Christ, not just in the flips we’re doing,” said Johnson, after the pair’s final dive.

Johnson grew up “idolizing” Boudia. “We can’t take all the credit for this. God be the glory. This is why we do what we are doing,” Boudia said.

She could have kept running, pursuing an Olympic dream after four years of rigorous training. But what Abbey D'Agostino did on Tuesday during the women's 5,000-meter event required something more than muscle or skill. It required one of the best characteristics available to humans: compassion.

During the race, the Topsfield, Mass., runner got tangled with New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin. D'Agostino clipped Hamblin's foot during the run and Hamblin fell to the ground, D'Agostino tumbling as well. D'Agostino then jumped back up to her feet. But instead of running away from her fallen opponent, D'Agostino helped Hamblin up.

"Come on, get up," D’Agostino told Hamblin, we have to finish this race."

As both runners resumed toward the finish, D'Agostino was hobbling, grimacing in pain. D'Agostino suffered an injury during the fall, later revealed to be her ankle. Hamblin stayed with her until it she was able to continue under her own power. After making it to the finish, D'Agostino was helped off of the track in a wheelchair. Hamblin was right there with her.

When asked about all of this Abbey D’Agostino said, “Sometimes God just has other plans for us and I think that he had a plan for Nikki and me that will forever make us lifelong friends.”

Yes, sometimes God does have a plan for us that we can’t see. I have been there and so have you. If there is one item that forever fascinates most Presbyterian clergy it is the concept of God’s call. We even use this terminology. When pastors encounter each other at Presbytery or some other gathering they do not ask, “Where do you work?” but “where has God called you.” They do not ask each other, “Where do you work?” but “Where do you serve?”

The call of God upon a life is vocation. It is a great gift of God. The call comes not because of our personal attributes, or because of any of our alleged virtues, but solely out of the gracious goodness of God. Our only qualification to be disciples is the call of God. The authorization for each of our ministries is God's.

The Book of Jeremiah opens with Jeremiah hearing God call him, even though he is but a youth, to speak God's word to Israel. We’ll be exploring that a bit today, but in preparation let us pray.

When I graduated from college in 1969, business folks were all reading a book titled *The Peter Principle* by Laurence J. Peter. Basically it stated that the selection of a candidate for a position with a company is normally based on the candidate's performance in their current role, rather than on abilities relevant to the intended role. So, those of us hoping to get a position hoped that good grades might be the key to having a company choose us. But behind this all was the principle that ultimately managers would rise to the level of their incompetence.

The Peter Principle is a special case of a ubiquitous observation: Anything that works will be used in progressively challenging applications until it fails. Peter suggests that "In time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties" and [the corollary] that "work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence."

He noted that their incompetence may be because the required skills are different, but not more difficult. For example, an excellent engineer may be a poor manager because they might not have the interpersonal skills necessary to lead a team. Rather than seeking to promote a talented "super-competent" employee, Peter suggested that an incompetent manager may set them up to fail or dismiss them because they are likely to "violate the first commandment of hierarchical life with incompetent leadership: the hierarchy must be preserved".

What began to follow from this and other writings became a rage at Universities all across the United States. They offered courses in micro leadership and macro leadership, leadership skills and leadership techniques, professors of leadership, and institutes of leadership grew like wildfire.

I know just enough about leadership studies to know that most of us would benefit from leadership training. It was one of the areas noticeably absent from my official course work. But, I am not so naïve as to believe that leaders are all made and not born. I know that there are such things as leadership skills, strategies, and traits. Still, something in me resists this push to believe that all leadership is the result of training.

Today's scripture is Jeremiah's account of how he got to be a prophet, a religious leader in Israel. Take it as a paradigmatic story of Christian leadership. The first thing you will note is that this whole thing was God's idea, not Jeremiah's. "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah," is how the story begins (v. 2). Which is hardly ever how we imagine most of our leaders emerging.

Maybe you have plowed through McCullough's biography of Truman. Though young Harry failed at just about everything he undertook, he had an indomitable sense of destiny. He had in his head the odd notion that this kid from Missouri would one day be a Hannibal, a Caesar, or a Lee. Jeremiah had, so far as we know, none of this on his mind. I think, from the text, he must have been about 18. And you know what most 18-year-olds have on their minds and it's not, "How can I grow up to become an abrasive prophet who goes up to the palace and tells the king that he's a fool and that his kingdom will be destroyed."

To underscore the divine origins of Jeremiah's vocation, God tells him, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (v. 5). This whole thing was God's idea, from the first. Jeremiah's ambition, his sense of destiny, his alleged skills had nothing to do with it. All of this is from God.

Picture your application for a job. On your application form you say, "Since I was a fetus, I had a dream to join the accounting department of a major auto parts store and . . ."

The story goes out of its way to assert that nothing about young Jeremiah - no talent, no inclination, no natural ability suggests that his call makes sense. In fact, when told of his call, Jeremiah protests, "I don't know how to do public speaking! I'm only a kid. I get nervous in front of a crowd. My SAT scores were 200 points better on the math than the verbal."

Many late adolescents try to appear older than they actually are. Jeremiah, on the other hand, though he is a young adult, says, "I'm only a kid!"

Most late adolescents appear all grown up until they come to that point where they feel that they are being asked to get in over their heads, stretched beyond their abilities, then they protest. It is then that the voice of God moves from call to rebuke: Don't pull that I'm only a kid business. You'll go where I'll send you. You'll speak what I tell you. I'll watch over you." Again, this whole call thing is God's idea. It is not based upon a savvy assessment of potential professional skills or personal attributes but rather upon the inscrutable gracious choice of God.

In my experience, most of us are slow to get this point. We stagger into our counselor’s or advisor’s office sometime during our junior year, saying that we are miserable because our life has gotten disrupted. We are thinking about changing our major, trying to get the courage to tell our parents that our life course has been altered by the challenges of biogenetics.

But, how might we feel if we were the counselor and the student presenting herself in front of us was thinking about changing majors to study geology because she told us that there was a nagging call from God to help people who don’t have pure water on a remote continent and she had a spiritual direction now to find some.

As good counselors we ask for a broader explanation about this sense of call and she tells us. "This is nuts." She protests it. "I've got these habits. I'm not the greatest person in the world, not by a long shot. I've got baggage. To follow God’s leading seems like such an absurd ambition.”

You who have not been born a counselor but have been trained in counseling to listen politely, probably would never say, “You poor college student. Have you never read a bit of the Bible? Ever heard of the call of Jeremiah? God is a sucker for people like you!" [[1]](#footnote-1)

In fact, if you think of the call of Jacob, or Moses, or Mary, or the 12 disciples, you might conclude that being totally inept, immoral, cowardly, and dumb are the only qualities God looks for in calling potential leaders!

We come away from our reading of the call of Jeremiah with the conclusion that there's no such thing as "leadership" as science or art in the Bible. At least in Jeremiah, there is nothing that resembles our acquaintance with "leadership studies."

Sometimes I think that God will place us in locations to work on things we have no business doing. Two weeks ago when we were in Kenya I had this personal inquiry in my mind, “Lord, what is it that I need to do here, really? Make some pancakes in the morning? Teach these children to play dodge ball? Conduct an English class at the school? Drill holes in metal plates and purlins? Now Ron Pollock is a genius in working out spacing, squaring buildings and the like. That is not a skill I possess. I only know enough to be dangerous. I did ask him, “Ron, in Kenya folks tend to prefer to use metric. What do you want to use?” Ron said, “I can use metric or just stick with the imperial, US customary foot measurement.”

Well, I began to think about that and then it hit me, that the Bible would probably suggest metric since there were 10 commandments. But, just about the time I reasoned that I realized that Noah built his boat in cubits and that if God really had wanted to use metric he wouldn’t have selected the 12 tribes of Israelites or Jesus chosen 12 disciples. “Hey Ron, the Bible is OK with either, too,” was the report.

The call of God tends to tell us more about God than about the recipient of the call. Isn't it odd that God needs someone, particularly an inept young person like Jeremiah to do what God wants done? One might think that being God means the ability to work solo. No. Something about the God of Israel and the church reaches out to ordinary people, like Jeremiah, to get the job done. And it doesn’t seem to matter to God whether they are 16 or sixty-one.

For another, it is odd of God to pick Jeremiah. Jeremiah knows as much. He lodges a basic objection: "I am not a good talker." In saying that he is not good at public speaking, Jeremiah is not acting humbly. He really isn't good at any of the skills listed on a job description for a prophet.

To Jeremiah's objections, God promises to give him all he needs to do the job right. Perhaps God believes in Jeremiah more than the boy believes in himself. Maybe an all-knowing God sees something in Jeremiah, some potential awaiting development that Jeremiah can't see.

From this vignette I am in the process of deriving three principles for biblical leadership:

**1. Leadership begins in the mind of God**, as gracious inclusion of humanity into the plan and purposes of God. The roots of biblical leadership are essentially theological rather than anthropological. God's choice tells us more about the quality of God than the positive qualities of the people who are called to lead.

**2. Speaking of the people who are called to lead, they are almost universally, laughably, the wrong people.** That is, it is almost as if God goes out of God's way to pick those who, at least on the face of it, have no virtues or qualities that suggest they would be good leaders. Perhaps God likes a challenge. Maybe God, being a creator who makes something out of nothing, considers vocation a continuing aspect of creation. Any God who could make an introverted kid like Jeremiah into a really quite wonderful prophetic leader must be some God.

**3. The qualities of "good leadership" are more gracious gifts of God to be gratefully received rather than skills, techniques, or knowledge to be developed.** When the chips are down, all biblical leaders have for credentials is faith in the promise, "Go. I will be with you"(1:1).

I know. It goes quite against our grain to conceive of leadership in this way, as the choice and work of God, rather than something that we do. We enjoy thinking of our lives as something we decide, a project we have chosen, a path we have conceived on our own. Specific biblical leadership begins, not in our ambition to rule, or in realistic assessment of our talents, but rather in summons. As Jesus put this in Gospel Leadership 101: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last . . ." (Jn 15:16a).

We fear loss of control. We have anxiety over what life is like to be accountable to someone other than ourselves. It is somewhat frightening to construe our lives in such a theonomous cast, to have our lives lived in constant reference to the purposes of God. A life tethered to the movements of God can be tough.

But it is also invigorating to receive the freedom and the dissonance of living the called life in a world where all too many people are answerable to nothing more than themselves. Sometimes the call comes early (Jeremiah felt it from his time in the womb. "Before you were born . . . from the womb" Jer 1:5), sometimes it comes late as with Abraham and Sarai (Gen 17). Whenever the call comes, in saying yes to the summons, we yield to the adventure of a life free of the ideology of personal autonomy that so enslaves this culture. We are owned, commandeered for God, being used for purposes greater than ourselves.

Even now you can go on the internet and find lots of self-help websites or books that will tell you about how you can find your purpose or the career that is right for you. But there is far less literature to suggest that it could be wise and satisfying if we were to find God’s purpose for us.

And with this demanding, even frightening call comes a promise for young Jeremiah, an astounding promise: I will put you over kingdoms and nations, I will give you authority to pull down empires and make new kingdoms (v. 10).

The absurdity of telling something like this to this kid! You shall be a prophet! You will speak truth to power. You will go up to the palace and bring this whole kingdom to its knees so that I might plant a new kingdom in its place. What absurd ambitions!

Yet, have we not noted, this is an absurdly gracious God. The God who would create a world out of nothing, on the basis of nothing but words, the God who would make a chosen people out of a rag tag tribe of nomads, a God who would raise Jesus from the dead is just the sort of God who would think it cool to call a kid to speak words that shake the whole world. Would be just the sort of God who would think it fun to make a claim on a life like yours, to have your name since you were in the womb, to have plans for you, a job to fill, a task to undertake.

Jesus began his ministry by assembling a gaggle of ex-fishermen, tax collectors, and assorted peasants. He turned to the 12 of them, called each by name and said, "I'm going to transform the world. And guess who's going to help me?"

Mae Koscheski read her medical bills closely, even those pesky surcharges that were tucked into the invoice and easily overlooked.

It’s a good thing she did, because one of her bills included a surcharge of $70 for — “extreme age.”  
  
Getting old is bad enough. Hospital bills. Prescription drug charges. The cost of assisted living, nursing home and life-care facilities. But paying an “extreme age” tax on your hospital bill! That’s salt in the wound.  
  
Mae is 73. That’s old, but not “extremely old.” Granted, there are days when taking the extreme age exemption might be worth it. We’d like to pull the covers over our heads, stay in bed, and skip the round of meetings that day.   
  
In any case, extreme age is not what is bothering the young Jeremiah in today’s text. Rather than claiming an extreme age exemption, he falls back on the youth exemption. “I am only a boy” (1:6).   
  
God doesn’t buy it. In fact, questions of service, mission and discipleship have no relation to age issues, or gender issues. God doesn’t seem to be limited at all by the categories that we think are important: Age. Race. Gender. Education. Disability. Economic status.  
  
As for retirement, it’s hard to find the notion of retirement in the Bible, and Tony Campolo says somewhere in his voluminous writings, that retirement is unbiblical.  
  
Jeremiah wants to retire before he’s hired or tired. Wants to stop before he goes; to quit before he starts; to sit down before he stands up.  
  
Not Dorothy Day. When Day was only 8 years old, something happened that would shape the rest of her life. She didn’t know it then (she was only a child), that she was experiencing an earthquake. Her brass bed was rolling across the floor and the earth was shaking. It was April 18, 1906, and the great earthquake of the century had hit San Francisco.  
  
It was many years later when she described her experience in her autobiography. By then, she was known by many as a living saint, “the prioress of the Bowery” and the founder of Hospitality Houses all over the country where she, and her movement of Catholic workers, cared for the poorest of the poor. They still care for them. It all began when this girl was very young. She could have said to God, as the prophet Jeremiah did, “Not me, I am but a child.” But she didn’t.  
  
According to her biographer, Paul Elie, she had frequent nightmares of God as a young child. And that night of the earthquake was no exception. Either a nightmare or dream, “a great noise became louder and louder and approached nearer and nearer to me, until I woke up sweating, screaming for my mother.”   
  
In her mind, it was all linked up with God’s call upon her and the call was fierce, haunting and not at all friendly. The earthquake only lasted 140 seconds. But the city was devastated, in smoky ruins, rubble everywhere. Day, haunted by God’s presence in nightly visits, went out to see the wreckage on the streets. She saw people from all walks of life helping others, women cooking, men offering spare clothes, tents being raised in the rubble. What she felt as she watched became a vision of the calling that would last the rest of her life.  
  
“While the crisis lasted, people loved each other,” she wrote. “It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity. It makes one think of how people could, if they would, care for each other in times of stress, ungrudgingly in pity and love.” Elie notes, “A whole life is prefigured in that one episode. In a moment of history, Dorothy Day felt the fear of God and witnessed elemental, biblical charity, the remedy for human loneliness.”   
  
The rest of her life, 88 years, she would work out that calling that occurred when she was but a young child. At 8 years old, the pattern of her life began to unfold ever so slowly.[[2]](#footnote-2)  
  
No earthquake for Jeremiah when God spoke to him. But the young man clearly did not feel ready for the task. “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Jeremiah’s demur is understandable; after all, he is being called to speak God’s word to nations in rebellion. The Word spoken from the mouth of Jeremiah will have the power to “pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (v. 10).   
  
The calling of God is serious and important, but if we are going to offer an excuse to avoid service, it can’t be linked to age.   
  
Of this, Paul reminds Timothy: “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example ...,” was the advice he gave Timothy, his young friend and coworker in the ministry (1 Timothy 4:12).  
  
So when young Jeremiah cries out, “I am only a boy,” we understand and might even agree. But God will have nothing to do with our age limitations. In a rather firm, clear voice the Lord responded to Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’ ... for I am with you to deliver you” (v. 7).   
  
What’s the take-home message here? *God will guide, support and deliver those whom God calls and God calls anyone whom God chooses, regardless of age, status or other perceived limitations.*  
  
And we can’t say that we aren’t smart enough to service God because the Bible says, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards .... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27).  
  
We can’t say that we’re not powerful and connected, because God says “not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth ... but God chose what is foolish ...”  
  
We can’t say that we’re not strong enough, because God choose “what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27).  
  
We can’t say that we’re not respectable enough because “God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:28).   
  
We can’t say that we’re lousy public speakers because the apostle Paul himself admits: “And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).   
  
So why does a Jeremiah, or a Moses, or a Samuel, or a David, or a Dorothy Day, or any of the rest of us accept God’s call to service?  
  
Three G’s: so that *God Gets the Glory!*  
  
Paul writes: “God chose what is low and despised in the world ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Corinthians 1:28-31).  
  
It’s all about GOD. Living in this millennium, we’re used to a human-centric world where everyone who’s selling anything assures us that it is all about me, or you. It’s not.   
  
It’s all about what God GETS. We’re the ones who spend, who acquire, who waste, who gather, who accumulate, who build, who take in — and while we understand the notion of giving back, or charity, of putting some cash in the collection plate — God doesn’t want a part of us; God wants it all!  
  
It’s all about God getting the GLORY! Praise and worship of God fills all of Scripture. When history is concluded, the faithful from every time and era will gather to give praise to God.  
  
This is what the call of God is about: living and serving in a way that directs the glory and the praise to God.   
  
The good news is found in Jeremiah 1:8. We give our lives to God’s service — whatever that may be — and God says: “I am with you to deliver you.”  
  
God’s Presence and Protection Program. What more do we need? We certainly don’t need to claim our youth or extreme age as excuses.   
  
While waiting for her first appointment in the reception room of a new dentist, a middle-aged woman noticed the dentist’s certificate, which bore his full name. Suddenly, she remembered that a tall, handsome boy with the same name had been in her high-school class some 30-plus years ago.  
  
Upon seeing him, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. This balding, gray-haired man with a deeply lined face was way too old to have been her classmate. After he had examined her teeth, she asked him if he had attended the local high school.  
  
“Yes,” he replied.  
  
“When did you graduate?” she asked.  
  
He answered, “In 1967. Why?”  
  
“You were in my class!” she exclaimed.  
  
He looked at her closely and then asked, “What did you teach?”

Gordon Crosby founded the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., in 1946. Widely recognized as one of the most innovative models of church in this country, over nearly 65 years later the Church of the Savior is still doing creative ministry through 12 small mission congregations.   
  
Gordon, at age 91, still preached every Sunday. He made his daily pastoral rounds in the inner city of Washington, D.C., and was asking challenging questions of himself and his community about the wineskins that are necessary to best communicate the gospel. Gordon passed away in 2013 at the age of 95, having released himself from pastoral responsibilities when he was 91.   
  
Retirement is a false myth in the economy of God’s call. God calls anyone, without regard to human limitations. Sometimes his call comes to us when we are in our 80s and 90s suggesting that now is the time to pay attention to those who are lonely around us. Our ministry changes as does its nature, but if we keep the 3 Gs in front, that God Gets the Glory, we can better discover God’s purpose for us at the time.  
  
Extreme age — or youth — never creates extra charges, according to God, only extra opportunities. And although to most of the world God has this seemingly absurd ambition to transform and create, so often using the least likely and least capable, even you and me.

1. The Sermon, *Baggage,* was preached on August 22, 2010 at 1st Presbyterian Church of Pittsford. That day the text focused on Jeremiah 1, Isaiah 58, Hebrews 12 and Luke 13 and this illustration was adapted from something similar. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elie, Paul. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)