

“Touched”

Sermon by Leah Fowler

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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13:10-17

I have a confession. When I grew up listening to sermons, I found them to be very dry and boring. As a young child I could get away with resting my head in my mother’s lap during worship, or doodling and passing notes on the back of the pew cards. As I got older, I certainly had the option of skipping worship, but for whatever reason I stayed-- I was involved enough in other parts of church that were very meaningful to me that I felt like I ought to go to worship too. But I still found the sermons dull.

And here’s the thing: I attended a church that was built up around the charisma of the pastor. Everyone swooned about what a good preacher he was. And so I kept going to worship, listening to his sermons, but still not really seeing whatever it was that everyone else thought. I still accepted their word for it, that he was a great preacher and figured I just wasn’t mature enough, or spiritual enough, or smart enough to appreciate his words. And because so many people praised this man’s preaching, I figured that a “good sermon” should be like his: dry, dull and boring.

To be fair, the pastor of my youth was a powerful preacher. He was an artful storyteller, and the cadence of his Southern accent was simply mesmerizing. He had a three-point formula, and I think people liked knowing they would have three take-homes to use beyond the sanctuary. Now I suspect that my budding theology clashed with his, which made me less receptive to his efforts to preach a good word.

But I confess a little part of me even through seminary held up that pastor’s sermons as the gold standard-- even though I did not relate to it. And so when I first started preaching, I would imitate what I perceived to be his style. I don’t know if I my sermons ever reached his gold standard, but I do know I was very

successful in preaching some dry, boring sermons-- hopefully more in the beginning of my preaching career than toward the end.

I had to eventually find my preaching voice, and it wasn't the revered voice of the sermons of my childhood; nor was it in the style of my seminary preaching professor, who taught preaching in the style of the Black church. I had to find how God calls *Leah Fowler* to preach, and sometimes it is still a struggle to hear that. Part of what sometimes causes my preacher's block for me is a bit of imposter's syndrome. This term, coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, is "a feeling of 'phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement.' People with impostor's syndrome may be 'highly motivated to achieve,' but they also "live in fear of being 'found out' or exposed as frauds."

Pulitzer Prize-winning author, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou struggled with impostor's syndrome. According to the New York Times, she said, "I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'" (NYT Oct. 26 2015). Now I am no Maya Angelou, but I am humbled that people will actually sit through 15 minutes of what I might have to say, and I pray to God that it doesn't have to be just me doing the work I must bring to my sermons for the church-- that God will somehow touch my lips, too.

When God called Jeremiah to speak, the young man also questioned his power to speak. "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah joins Moses as another of God's leaders who at first does not think he is worthy to speak for God. But The Lord touched Jeremiah's mouth with God's hand and gave this blessing: "See, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

No wonder Jeremiah was afraid. God did not bless him to offer chicken soup for the soul. God touched him and called him to speak risky and powerful words.

Following God's call can indeed cause you to do risky and powerful things. Just look at Jesus' ministry. His words and actions had a power so threatening to the political and religious order that they paved the way toward his death. On the day that he healed the bent-over woman on the Sabbath, he made the synagogue leader indignant with righteous anger. After all, this woman had been stooped for 18 years: couldn't Jesus have waited just another day instead of breaking one of the ten commandments in the very place where the Law was kept and taught?

But for Jesus and for the woman he encountered, the time was a *kairos* moment. Contrary to day-to-day time or *chronos* in Greek, *kairos* time refers to a supreme moment, a liminal space where the divine infuses the moment and anything can happen. What Jesus was doing couldn't wait. He had to respond to God's call in that moment in order to fulfil the larger vision of divine and human purpose. He responded, even though it was risky.

We do not need to be Jesus in order to hear God's call and in the moment follow it. We do not need to be preachers or prophets either to be called by God to speak and do risky things. Our Reformed traditions recognizes that God touches each of us and calls us to speak and act in holy moments that work toward building the larger vision of God. No one can do it quite like you, and God chose you in your unique ways to bring forward a piece of God's work in the world.

Last month when I attended a conference at Lake Tahoe, I used some of my free time to go paddleboarding on the lake. As I first paddled out of the inlet where I rented my board, I thought to myself, "This is easy." I glided along the water and couldn't help but imagine Jesus, locks flowing as he calmly sauntered up to panicked disciples in boat battered by the waves in an upset sea. "Cool," I thought, as I stood perpendicular to the water and wondered if Jesus felt the same sensations when he too stood on the sea (which was really a lake).

Then I made it across the harbor, and it was time to turn my paddleboard around. I had barely turned 180 degrees when a wave smashed against my paddleboard. My gut clenched; arms flailing and legs akimbo, I had the grace of a giraffe in a

bouncy house as I regained my balance on the board. And just as I found equilibrium again, another wave smashed against my board and *kerplunk!* my sun-drenched body and Jesus-dreaming ego were both dunked into the glacial waters.

But falling was a grace, actually, because once it finally happened I wasn't afraid of it anymore. The second time I stood on the board, I realized that looking down caused me to lose my balance more surely than anything. Looking down was the temptation, so I could see the waves as they hit my board and adjust my body accordingly. But every time I did that, my board would wiggle and I would have to do ninja moves to stay on it. I found that looking up and ahead at the horizon kept my balance more than anything. Indeed, looking down at the waves fostered the absurd notion that *I might have any kind of control over the waves*. By looking ahead, my body just naturally responded to the waves rather than reacted against them.

Just as much as Jesus' touch led the bent-over woman to stand upright and see Jesus face to face, he was also telling the crowd around him-- especially the religious leaders-- to *look ahead* and see God's wider vision rather than look down and be thrown off by each wave, each ripple of change Jesus' ministry brought forth.

It is so easy to look down and see the waves that distract us from God's call. We have waves of doubt about our self-worth and our ability to be agents of God's word. We have waves of anxieties, and we study each one rather than seeing the broader horizon of our lives. We have waves of terrible things happen to us, and we wonder how can this wave be God's plan? And as we study the wave, looking for God in it, we are missing God laid out before us, above us and beneath us, where the sun strikes the surface of the water, where life teems beneath the surface, and where the earth meets the sky in the beautiful horizon of which we are a part.

Occasionally, we will fall and be immersed, especially if we are taking holy risks. That is ok too-- because as Christians, it will not be the first time we are touched

by water. In our initial Christian blessing of baptism, water touches us with grace and assures us that nothing can throw us off from God's promises to love and uphold us. Amen.