

## “God Knew You” –

For as long as I can remember it's been difficult for me to accept a compliment. Growing up, I was often challenged to not be too full of myself or think too much of myself, which always makes me quite self-conscious when I receive a compliment.

When I started Seminary, I made the choice to begin part-time. I hadn't been a full-time student in nearly 20 years and I wasn't sure I'd be able to do it. Being a part-time theological student was challenging. I didn't have the opportunity to bond with classmates because I was taking one course at a time, while they had a full-time schedule. When I had exhausted all the night courses I could take at Huron, I applied for and received a Letter of Approval in order to take “elective” courses at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, now known as “Martin Luther University College”, which was a ten minute walk from where I lived. Much easier commute than the 90 minute drive from Waterloo to London. This meant that I could take a course at WLU and transfer it to my MDiv program at Huron, while I was still part-time.

Dr. Arnie Weigel taught a course called Theology and Social Construct. Our classes were two hours and we were meant to have a 15 minute break part way through but because this class was so fabulous we opted not to take a break and instead, met for a solid two hours, sometimes a bit longer, discussing whatever was on the syllabus for that week. Dr. Weigel would choose one student a week and shower them with compliments. It made me exceedingly uncomfortable and yet also grateful that I wasn't under his focus. Until I was. As a class we brought tea to share, while Dr. Weigel provided a kettle and we drank tea while we studied and worked together.

One evening I was first to class and went to fill the kettle from the student lounge at the end of the hallway. I came back in and he thanked me. “You're welcome”, I said and sat down. He passed a stack of notes for me to share with the class. “You distributed those nicely, thank you, Andrea”, he said. “You're welcome”, I said, “it was nothing, really.” Class got underway and for the next hour and a bit, at every opportunity Dr. Weigel would compliment me

and with every compliment I would volley it back with the universal hand gesture for "oh stop, it's nothing really" and he would try again.

Eventually, after me volleying every compliment back, he took a deep, exasperated breath, slammed his fist on the table and said, in a loud voice "For God sake Andrea, learn to accept a compliment". We all sat dumbfounded. Dr. Weigel had never raised his voice, never mind slamming his fist down. "Why can't you see what the rest of us see in you?" he asked. And under my breath, with tears in my eyes I said "because I don't believe I deserve compliments."

His anger dissipated, his face relaxed and he looked at me sadly. "If I were to give you an egg, what would you do?" he asked. My reply "I would accept the egg, carefully and say thank you." "Excellent" was his reply.

"Now, what if I gave you a priceless Fabergé egg? Jewel encrusted, worth more money than either of us would ever know?" he asked. I raised my hands in front of me. "Please don't give me something like that", I pleaded. "I would be so afraid to break it. I would never accept a gift so valuable as that."

He continued "And what if I told you that every time I give you a compliment, you are receiving a priceless gift? And every time you refuse or refute the compliment you are taking that priceless gift and smashing it on the floor?"

Without realising it, tears were falling from my eyes. I was unable to speak. Never in my life have I felt as devastated as I did at that moment, understanding that when someone is giving a compliment, it's to express gratitude and give a gift, a token of esteem. And every time I would refuse it I was smashing that gift into oblivion. There are not enough thank you cards to send everyone whose gifts I smashed into oblivion.

He came closer to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "I know that you would never knowingly smash something, would you?" he asked. "Never" I croaked through tears. "Never."

"Well then", he said, "what can you say the next time someone gives you a compliment?" "Thank you?" I asked.

"Yes," he responded." What else? What if someone complimented your preaching?" "That compliment is not for me, that came from God, it should be God who receives that compliment", I said. "No, not exactly," said Dr. Weigel. "How about, Thank you, my ability is a gift from God and I thank you both."

I made a face and he said "Give it time...practice...you'll get there".

I'm still learning to accept a compliment. So if you see me with a dumbfounded expression on my face saying "thank you" over and over again, it's because I don't know what else to say. And I don't want to risk smashing the priceless gift into oblivion.

I tell you this because Jeremiah had a similar reaction. It is believed he was about seventeen years old when God called him to the life and service of a prophet.

To paraphrase –

God – Hey, Jeremiah - I've got a job for you. I'm going to appoint you a prophet, an important guy with an important message to give to all and sundry on my behalf.

Jeremiah - Um, what God, you want me to – what?

God – I want you to take my message to all the people of the land!

Jeremiah - Uh, well, you see, I'm too young for this, I have no experience and nobody would listen to me because, well, I'm a kid.

God – It's okay Jeremiah, I've known you longer than you've been alive. I knew you, a long time ago, before you were a twinkle in your father's eye. That's how long I've known you.

Jeremiah – Uh – well – I'm not sure –

God – Don't fret Jeremiah, I'll tell you what to say, in fact, I'll put the words in your mouth. Don't worry. You'll be awesome!

Could you imagine being Jeremiah at this moment?

Today's section begins so beautifully, "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,'" (Jeremiah 1.5, NRSV)

A few verses later God says "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you," (Jeremiah 1.8, NRSV)

God literally puts words in Jeremiah's mouth and he becomes a very well respected prophet over forty years. Forty YEARS! Now, a lot of what God had Jeremiah tell people was not well received. But that is a story for another day.

Quite often when I talk to people about discerning a call to ministry, I receive a deer in the headlights look. They may or may not say "Me? You mean ME? Oh, no. Not me. You've got me confused with someone else, I could never –"

At times I'm tempted to share the story of Jeremiah, a reluctant yet powerful prophet. Instead, I tell them WHY I think they would be suited for the ministry that I've asked them. I give them time to discern on their own. And I always include a reminder that NO is a legitimate answer and a full sentence.

Like Jeremiah, God has known you all your life and then some.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you", says God to Jeremiah.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you", says God to me.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you", says God to you, and YOU, and YOU.

Before we were even cells in our mother's uterus God knew us. And God has remained with us – through our best times and our worst times.

One of my favourite poems is "Footprints". It's the tale of a person walking with Jesus side by side. They lament that at the times in their life that were the most difficult, when there is only one set of footprints, which they assume to be theirs. Jesus responds that it was during those difficult times, when the author felt abandoned and alone, that Jesus was carrying them; thus the footprints the person sees are those of Jesus.

I deeply believe that every child is born of love. That they are chosen to be born and loved into existence by God. God is with them, knitting them together, as their parents plan, pray, fret and prepare for their birth.

For children who do not grow to term, I don't believe that their death is a punishment in any way. I also do not believe that their death is planned, or God's will. For children who are born with disabilities, I don't believe God is punishing their parents or them. Because you see, I believe in God, and I also believe in science. Some pregnancies are not viable. It's devastating, yet it happens. God is with that baby as well as being with the grieving parents, siblings and family.

When we are born our families celebrate and welcome us into the community. If we are born into a family of faith, at some point we are baptised. Baptism is not our introduction to God...remember God has been with us from the very beginning. Baptism is where the community of faith welcomes us to that family.

Whether you are baptised as an infant, toddler, child, youth, teenager or adult, it is a celebration. It is a party where you and God are the guests of honour.

What has been your call from God? What is your ministry? Not all of us can be pastors or prophets. Not all of us are called to be spouses or parents? Some of us are called to lives of service and others to lives of leadership. Some of us lead fulfilling lives, while others are bored to distraction. Some of us are tested with addiction and mental illnesses, while others are tested in other ways.

None of us are better than others. None of us are worse than others. In God's eyes we are all created equal and we are all created in perfection. God's perfection is far different than society's perfection. And I give thanks to God for that!

Remember the call from God to Jeremiah. Remember Jeremiah's protest. Remember to listen to your own call, and discern that to which you have been called. It may be terrifying to contemplate God's call, and believe me when I say, it will not be the easiest thing you have ever done.

In fact, it will be the opposite of easy. Yet putting your faith in God, and in yourself, you will learn what to say, what to do. You will, at times, have words placed in your mouth and other times, sit in absolute silence.

Answering any call is frightening. Answering God's call is all that and then some. Know this. You will not be alone. You will find shelter in the storm, you will find comfort in the midst of fear and you will find light in the darkness.

You will be given the words when you least expect it. You will receive priceless gifts. Here's hoping you learn to accept the gift rather than smash it. And may know how very much you are loved.

In God's eyes of perfection and in society's eyes of imperfection. You are loved. And you are not alone. You are fantastic at being you. Learn to accept a compliment as a priceless gift. And know that in yourself, you are a priceless gift.

Thanks be to God.

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