

Date: September 2, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 22

**SERMON: Cracked Cisterns or Living Water?**

Text(s): Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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How many of you grew up in a place where you had a cistern to store rainwater? I really had no experience with cisterns until we went to Malaysia as missionaries in 1974. The parsonage we were assigned to live in was an old Somerset Maugham-style rambling tropical bungalow, with the bedrooms and large living room set up off the ground on wooden pilings about three feet high, and with the kitchen and dining room and laundry on ground level. Just outside the kitchen door was a large concrete cistern about six feet long three feet wide and about four feet deep. It also caught rainwater from the roof.

At first, I couldn't imagine why we needed a cistern, when we had a perfectly good and safe city water supply, and we lived in a place that had only two seasons— wet and wetter. With around 180 inches of rain per year, and no pronounced dry season, why did we need a cistern? In the wetter season, it was a rare occurrence to go even one day with no rain at all. And even in the drier season, it was rare to go more than 3-4 days without drenching tropical downpours. It's true that we used the water in the cistern to water some of the potted plants on the porch, and after I started raising my own chickens, I gave them the water from the cistern, but it really wasn't necessary. In fact, every three months or so, government health inspectors would come round to see if there were any dengue fever-carrying mosquito larvae breeding in the cistern and give it a spray with some larvae killer if they found any.

After a little thought, it became clear that the cistern predated the city-supplied water, and not many years previously, had provided the family in the house with their fresh water supply for drinking and cooking. With the abundant

rainfall, that cistern would have been replenished on a regular basis, ensuring that the family had an adequate supply even during the rare five-day drought, and believe me, five days without rain in the tropics can seem very much like a drought.

The prophet Jeremiah, who lived and worked in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, used the image of cracked and broken cisterns to describe the dire situation in the Kingdom of Judah. With the expansionist Babylonian empire on the rise to the east, an inconstant ally-of-necessity like Egypt to the south, and a corrupt religious/political establishment at home in Jerusalem, he foresaw disaster looming over the nation. In the Temple States of the ancient Near East, not only was there no separation between church and state, or between religion and politics; they were one and the same. Kings ruled by the mandate of heaven and this mandate was mediated through the religious cult centered in the temple.

The office of the prophet in ancient Israel was to be a kind of check and balance in this alliance between the political power and the religious establishment. The prophet's calling was to speak truth to power. Some were insiders like Isaiah and Jeremiah— people who were themselves priests or religious leaders, but who felt a call for reform or to root out corruption. Others, like Amos or John the Baptist were outsiders— something like the Michael Moores of their day— the sort of loose cannon, wild man sort of social and political critic who feels called to speak out against corrupt religious and political leaders.

The problem, from God's viewpoint, which is what Jeremiah is supposed to speak about, is that bad religion has resulted in bad political decisions that have led to the breakdown of social harmony and justice at home and disastrous foreign policy decisions abroad. In our passage this morning, the prophet imagines God among the heavenly council of divine beings, in a kind of courtroom scene, where God is the plaintiff pleading a case against the people of Judah. In particular, the kings have tolerated the worship of the pagan deities of the Canaanites

rather than holding fast to the worship of the one God who had been revealed to their ancestors and had shown them how to live through the law given to Moses. *“You defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. Those who handle the law do not know me; the rulers transgressed against me, the prophets prophesied by the pagan god Baal.*

*Therefore I accuse you says the Lord. Cross to Cyprus in the west or to Kedar in the east and see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation ever changed its gods even though they are no gods at all? Be appalled, O heavens, at this; my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water.*

Usually, when things go wrong in our lives or in our society or in the larger world, we immediately look for someone to blame. We think: It’s the indecisive town council who’s responsible for the stalemate we’re in with regard to our need for a new elementary school; it’s those greedy people on Wall Street running those hedge funds that have caused my stock portfolio to lose value in the subprime mortgage disaster; it’s the ideological stupidity of the neo-conservatives who got us into this ugly, seemingly endless mess in Iraq, it’s those radicals at the ACLU that are responsible for all the pornography on the Internet that threatens my children. Frequently, we even blame God. As Woody Allen once said, it’s not that God doesn’t exist; it’s that God’s an underachiever.

And yet, this passage forces us to look at it from God’s perspective. Here it’s God looking at the mess his people have made of their personal and political life and asking in bewilderment and frustration, “How could they do this? How could they go after the gods that are no gods, the gods who cannot save, the gods who are powerless to establish justice and make life humane?” In other words, from God’s perspective, the problem with our blaming of all

the usual suspects for our troubles is due to a blindness on our part to our own complicity and responsibility for the mess we’re in. We’re the ones who love it when the stock market is going up, so we don’t ask too many questions about why and how. When our political leaders manipulate our fears and doctor intelligence to gain our support for their programs, who is responsible for the result? If we don’t want our children watching pornography on the Internet, who’s responsible? It’s not the ACLU lawyers or liberal judges who supplying the consumer demand for online pornography. If a lot of us didn’t buy what’s being offered, it wouldn’t be there. From where I sit, there has not been much concern for the common good evident in the wrangling and the straw votes over the issue of building a new school in town. A lot of competing self-interests, but not much real listening or cooperation.

We have our own “gods of the Canaanites.” We continually set our love and our hearts’ desire on things that cannot save us; we forsake the fountain of living water while we dig cracked cisterns that cannot hold water. And in so doing, we become practical atheists; we live as though God did not exist, even though we give lip service to God’s reality, perhaps even become a church member. But if our heart is given to something else, then to all extent and purposes, we have forsaken the glory of the really Real for that which does not ultimately profit.

In his wonderful little book *Beginning to Pray*, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, of the Russian Orthodox tradition, says that one of the most common experiences and complaints that all of us have when attempting to pray, to make contact with God as a living force, as a real part of our lives, is the feeling that God is absent much of the time. Yet, Bloom asks, who is really absent? Is it God who is absent from us, or we who absent ourselves from God most of the time? We go about our daily lives, caught up in our own self-centered concerns, following our own

agendas, never giving God so much as a spare thought, much less actually actively seeking to do God's will. But at the first sign of trouble, we begin asking, "God where are you? Why aren't you helping me? Why are you allowing this to happen?"

I suspect Metropolitan Anthony is right; in my case, at least, I'm sure he's right. I'd have to confess that I am absent from God far more than I have any right to accuse God of being absent from me. And I suspect that if you're honest, you'd have to confess that he's right about you too. Aren't we all to some extent busily digging our cisterns, trying to ensure for ourselves an adequate supply of the water of life, while overlooking the inexhaustible spring of living water close at hand?

God's case against the people was that in attempting to base their lives on anything but their trust in the faithfulness of God, they were sabotaging themselves without knowing it. The religious establishment cared only about perpetuating itself rather than really helping both the people and their leaders to ground their lives in that which is really real. The rulers, consequently, became corrupt and both their policies and the law itself became unjust, serving only to further erode the stability and social health of the nation.

And that's really the point of this lament of God over his people Israel, isn't it? It's not that all the things they're doing— domestic and foreign politics, the institutional religious life of the Temple, the business of making a living and governing themselves— are bad things. These are all necessary things for the smooth functioning of any human society. It's when these contingent things—these less-than-ultimate things— are elevated to the position of Ultimate Reality, when the ability to live a humane life is thought to depend upon institutionalized greed, or when religious and political institutions become ends in themselves and help to perpetuate and legitimize injustice rather than social harmony

and the common good, they become like cracked cisterns, incapable of holding water and sustaining life.

So how do we keep ourselves close to that fountain of the water of life instead of allowing ourselves to be dragged into the futile task of digging cracked cisterns?

Our gospel lesson provides us with a clue. Jesus suggests that we and our institutions only realize the fullness of life when we are humble enough to put the needs of others ahead of our own selfish interests.

*When you're invited to a banquet," he said, "don't sit down at the head table, even though you think you have a right to be there. Take a seat far down the table, and then let your host elevate you to your appropriate place at the appropriate time. And when you give a dinner party, don't invite all the people you expect to invite you to a dinner party they give in return. Rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind— all the people who could never reciprocate."*

How simple! And how far from our usual practice, isn't it? Why does this teaching sound so unrealistic that we could easily dismiss it as romantic idealism? It wasn't dismissed as such by the people who heard Jesus. To them, it was dangerous and subversive rabble-rousing. Jesus wasn't crucified because he was perceived as a mild social critic or a crank. His program, if you can call it that, threatened the entrenched self-interest of the religious and political establishments to the point where he could no longer be tolerated. I suspect, that most of us probably are so preoccupied with digging our cracked cisterns, that we can't imagine how things could be different. We just accept that the conventional wisdom that says, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," is the only way the world can work at all. The problem with that conventional wisdom is that if it is practiced consistently, it makes love impossible. For love,

real love, does not demand reciprocity. Real love is self-giving, real love is a self-emptying in order to make room for the other to come in. Real love seeks the common good rather than a narrow self-interest.

If we could take the risk of loving without conditions, of giving without strings attached, of accepting that all of us, despite our hard labor at digging cracked cisterns, are radically dependent upon the grace and mercy of the One who is the fountain of living water, we would begin to discover a new freedom— freedom from the grim necessity of digging those flawed cisterns. Freedom to enjoy life, freedom to love and be loved without worry about whether we're getting our fair reciprocal share or not. Freedom to risk reaching out to those whose fear of us or our fear of them imprisons us in mutual suspicion that often leads to violence. In other words, we have to live by faith.

Such freedom doesn't come easily. It takes constant attention, much prayer, and some clear-eyed decisions and commitments about what is most important for our lives. And I don't think it can be done at all apart from being part of a community where it is modeled and where we mutually encourage one another and lovingly hold one another accountable. We can't do this alone; we need each other. We need to pray with and for each other, to encourage and admonish one another, to hold each other's hands while we risk taking the first steps out of self-centeredness toward self-giving. That's what the church is about. Whether the church as an institution survives and prospers shouldn't really concern us all that much. Being the kind of community that bears witness by the way we live with one another and the open hands we hold out to those in need around us is really what we're about. By our life together in community, by our love and service, we testify that there is a spring of living water that never runs dry, a source that can quench the deepest thirst of all whose broken cisterns have left them dry and without hope.