

19 May 2019

Community, Not Institutions

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Our scripture today comes from the prophet Jeremiah, the last prophet to preach in Jerusalem before it was destroyed by the armies of Babylon. We read Jeremiah 2, verses 4-13:

⁴Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the Lord:

*What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?*

*⁶ They did not say, ‘Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?’*

*⁷ I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.*

*But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.*

*⁸ The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.*

*⁹ Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord,
and I accuse your children’s children.*

*¹⁰ Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.*

*¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.*

*¹² Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord,
¹³ for my people have committed two evils:*

*they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

I’d like to start with that final metaphor in Jeremiah’s prophecy – about cracked cisterns. This would have been immediately understandable to the people of Jerusalem. You see, Palestine is a semi-arid land. There isn’t a great deal of rain, so the people who live there have to make the most of what water they have. Springs of fresh, clear water are rare and therefore priceless. (In fact, that’s what the Hebrew expression “living water” means – free-flowing and therefore not stagnant water.) If you don’t have ready access to fresh water, you dig a cistern, plastering the inside to make it watertight, so as to catch run-off rain water and dew. The water in a cistern gets

a little rank and scummy after a while, but it's better than nothing. And a cistern even has one advantage: it's convenient. You dig it out right next to your house, and you can make it as big as you want. You might even be able to bring some water from a stream to fill it up, in which case you have water at arm's reach. Streams have better water, but you have to go them, they don't come to you, and sometimes they dry up without warning. If you have a cistern, you're in control. That's what lies behind Jeremiah's metaphor. He says that the people of Jerusalem have rejected God, the spring of living water, and decided instead to dig their own cistern, shaping their religious life after their own specifications and convenience. It wasn't the same – in fact, it was cracked, so it didn't even hold water – but it was handy, and it was *theirs*.

Let me tell you a little bit about this Jeremiah. He was called as a prophet during a time of optimism and growth in Jerusalem. The nation of Judah had a new young king named Josiah, and he was setting out to make Judah great again. The historical books of the Bible remember Josiah as a great reformer who returned the people of Jerusalem to the worship of the true God, but if you look at what he actually did, the effect is a little more ambiguous. Mostly he fixed up and refurbished Solomon's temple, which had fallen into disrepair. Then he passed laws making sure everyone worshiped there and only there. He sent soldiers out to destroy all other places of worship in Judah. This was surely intended to prevent people from worshipping other gods, but some of those small shrines were dedicated to the Lord. It didn't matter. All worship was to take place in Jerusalem, under the watchful eyes of the priests and the king. In effect, Josiah set out to restore the glory of the God of Israel, but in the effort, he mostly created a priestly bureaucracy and mandatory ritual observances. He created an institution.

Then King Josiah died, and the next year, the young prophet Jeremiah walked into the courtyard of the temple and preached a sermon to the people there in which he said, basically, "All that Josiah did to the temple is worthless unless your hearts are turned to the Lord. The temple is nothing. Stop saying, 'But we have the temple of the Lord, we have the temple of the Lord, we have the temple of the Lord!' because unless you turn to the Lord and change your hearts, God can and will destroy this temple."

Jeremiah was nearly stoned for that sermon, because to the priests and the people, attacking the temple institution was the same as attacking God. But that was Jeremiah's point: the institution and God are *not* the same thing. Worshiping the temple is dry and empty. We should be worshiping God. Look at the rest of the passage we just read: "Your ancestors forgot that God was the one who brought them up from Egypt; they went after worthless things, and in that way they became worthless." "Your priests have stopped asking 'Where is God?' because they think they have God at their fingertips. But everything that is under their management is not God." *My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.* That's what he means by the cistern metaphor. God is fount of living water, flowing freely where it will, always new, always pure, but never under your control. But you? You've built a temple and established rituals and ordained leaders and written out rules, and you think in all this you've captured God. You think you have God at your command. You've built a great big cistern to contain God. But it's cracked and empty, and you don't even know it.

Well, it happens. It happens in every area of our lives, in fact. Every good thing that we experience, we try to turn into a formula that we can reproduce at will. We try to “re-capture” that experience, but it doesn’t really work, does it? You have a wonderful, spontaneous anniversary picnic with your spouse one year, so you make it an annual tradition, which in a few years becomes a dreary duty that both of you hate, but you’re both afraid to admit it to the other. That’s generally what happens when you try to bottle an experience and repeat it instead of being open to new experiences that you’ve never even imagined. But maybe the area of our lives where we do it the most is in religion. We begin – I hope – with a powerful, transforming experience of the presence of God. But then we formalize that experience, write up a liturgy for it, and try to keep things just the way they were when we had the experience. After a while, we can forget the original experience and transfer our allegiance to the externals: to the building or the worship pattern or the denominational structure. That’s when we start putting our faith in “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” and forget that God is not the same as the institution. Steve Collins, a leader at Grace Alternative Worship in London, puts it this way: “The theology, I’d say, is that Christianity is actually a meta-religion with almost no prescribed outward form, so it can inhabit many cultures. But in having no prescribed form of its own it is constantly taken captive by its containers. The container is eventually assumed to be an essential part, until someone sees the distinction again and breaks it open. Very distressing, if you loved the container and didn’t see the distinction.”

Collins’s analogy works well with Jeremiah’s metaphor. God is a wild spring of fresh, life-giving water. We have drunk from that stream and been changed, but now what? How do we take that water to others? We need containers of some kind. Our containers are the United Methodist Church, the Wisconsin Conference, and this local congregation on Lake Street. We come here to drink from the Spirit and be refreshed. But the containers are not the same thing as God, and it’s when we forget that fact that we find ourselves trying to refresh ourselves in a dry, cracked, empty cistern.

Many today have given up on the church, seeing it as exactly that: barren and empty, an institutional shell of something that once mattered. These are the people who write “None” on surveys when they are asked their religious affiliation, and who tend to describe themselves as “spiritual, not religious.” I sympathize with them sometimes, when I’m most frustrated with my own United Methodist cisterns, but a private faith isn’t the answer. We need each other for encouragement and accountability. Most of all, the source of our faith, the spring from which the living water flows, is love, and the only way to learn and grow in love is in community.

Over the past few weeks I’ve tried to suggest some first principles to keep in mind as we face the possibility of significant changes in our religious institutions, our containers. Whatever happens to our current structures and policies and hierarchies, I’ve said, we need to remember that people matter more than doctrines and love matters more than rules. Today I want to say that, whatever may come, we must stay in community, even if the shape of that community changes, because we not only need each other, but we experience Christ in each other. To use an analogy suitable for Music Sunday, we’ve been a part of a huge performance in a massive

concert hall. If that hall closes down, let's not all go home to sing to ourselves in the shower. Let us find a choir and keep singing together.