

“How Cracked Pots and Broken Hearts are Mended”

Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church

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January 17, 2010

Jeremiah 2:4–13; Hosea 11:1-9

“Now that your son is a toddler,” Nathaniel’s pediatrician told me calmly and wisely a couple months ago, “you are going to have to start teaching him about consequences. You can tell him what he shouldn’t do, but if that is all you do, be prepared to be increasingly frustrated by his behavior. That little boy may look like the spitting image of you, but he does not yet think like you. You will have to tell him again and again and again, until the day finally comes when you will watch him do exactly the opposite of what you taught him for the 10, 000th time, and suddenly you’ll feel yourself actually losing your mind and your temper and your self-control all at once and screaming in outrage at the top of your lungs: “Dude! What part of ‘DO NOT.... fill in the blank...’ do you not understand?!” That will not be good moment for either of you; and of course if this kind of thing continues the stakes for both of you will only get higher when he grows into an even more rebellious teenager. So my only advice to you now is that if you really want your child to make the right choices, you have to do more than tell him what the right choices are, you also have to teach him how to make the right choices himself, by allowing him to experience the reasonably foreseeable consequences of his poor choices while he is still young, and the stakes for making the wrong ones are not very high. Then, by the time he is older, he will have taught himself how to figure out what the right thing is to do, and how to act responsibly. In my experience, the best and most effective parents don’t focus on teaching obedience; they focus on teaching love and logic. I know a book you can read that will help the both of you in the years to come....”

This doctor’s kind and wise words have lingered with me since that appointment, not only because they were useful to me as a first-time parent, but also because as a pastor who has been dwelling extensively in the words of the Old Testament prophets lately, (as by now I’m sure you’ve heard), I could not help hearing in the doctor’s humorous parenting scenario poignant echoes of the dilemma which underlies most of the Bible’s prophetic texts, including those we just heard from *Jeremiah* and *Hosea* this morning: what do you do when the children you love repeatedly make bad choices? In the biblical texts, people of faith don’t play the role of the frustrated parents, however; we are the disobedient children, and the parent who is being driven to the brink of insanity by our destructive and foolish behavior is none other than God. Listen again to the words of Hosea, speaking for God: “When Israel was child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them...” (Hos. 11:1-4). Can you hear the parental angst in this text? Since so much of the Old Testament is about laws and covenants, Christians sometimes lose sight of this image of God as our frustrated and heartbroken parent, and start thinking of the God of the Old Testament as a wrath-prone warrior or heartless, legalistic rule-monger, utterly different from the loving and forgiving God we know through Jesus Christ. But the Parent God who sent his only son to save us in the New Testament is the same Parent God, who in the Old Testament tried again and again to ensure that his children would enjoy lives with security and fulfillment, first by telling them

right from wrong through the law and the prophets, and then, when they still would not listen, by allowing them to experience the consequences of their own bad choices: exile. Jesus continued to teach these same lessons in his own ministry, explaining to his disciples that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. (Matt 5:17). Accordingly, until we also understand how to master and embody the prophets' lessons about what is good behavior for children of God, we will not truly be following Christ's example faithfully.

Thankfully, when we keep the idea of God as our loving and heartbroken Parent in mind, learning the prophets' lessons is neither as difficult nor depressing as some people believe because their pleas, and even their pronouncements of judgment, start sounding less like legalistic, unreasonable words of wrath, and more like urgent lessons in love and logic that we can still benefit from learning today. The show you will see next Sunday illustrates this beautifully, but so does today's text from *Jeremiah*. Both present us with a divine trial, which is a frequent metaphor in the prophetic texts. Humanity, or more specifically, the portion of humanity who should have known better, God's chosen, is on trial for breach of contract. The people are charged with breaking the sacred covenant with God which they entered into after Moses gave them the Ten Commandments, a covenant they reaffirmed when they accepted the Promised Land God gave them. Since breaking the terms of the covenant was a capital offense, this is a criminal breach of contract suit. God, via Jeremiah, presents the case for the prosecution and the heavens are the jury. After the summons to the people of Israel and Judah, we move right into God's opening statement, which is an historical recital of the events that have led up to the lawsuit. We hear how God graciously rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, guided and protected them in the wilderness, and gave them the best possible land as their own. We also hear how the people responded to these loving gifts by defiling the land they were given, appointing sinful rulers and spiritually vacant priests, and following false prophets and gods. Finally, we hear the two count indictment against them in verse 13. The people of faith are charged with forsaking the fountain of living water, and digging cracked cisterns for themselves.

All this is about fountains and cisterns? Although the people's plumbing choices may not sound especially criminal to us initially, if we consider the indictment in light of the whole history recounted in the opening argument, it becomes pretty clear that the people's choosing cracked cisterns, or cracked pots as they are called elsewhere in the prophets, over God's living water, is simply Jeremiah's metaphorical way of stating their real crime: turning away from God and toward idolatry. You see, the Kingdom of Israel was originally supposed to be a theocracy with God as king; but no sooner did they move into the Promised Land than the people began trying to do things exclusively on their own. Then to make matters worse, when they encountered challenges and grew anxious about their security or worried about being successful, instead of returning to God, they moved still further away by seeking false gods and idols for their source of comfort and hope. They pushed God so far from their lives that when things got bad, not even their priests thought to turn to God for help or even to pray "Where is God?" In effect, the whole nation originally created by God, changed gods on its own, even though the ones they changed their allegiance to were not really gods at all. And they did all of this even though the real God, Yahweh, who freed them from slavery, guided them in the wilderness and blessed them with abundance, was right there with them and was the only God who ever demonstrated the power to give them security, success or hope.

Think back for a moment to that God we encountered in Hosea, the God who taught his children to walk, and healed them when they fell, and wrapped them in bands of love and compassion, and it's not hard to imagine how the people's behavior made God feel. The first words of God's opening statement are "What wrong did you ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" The people's choice to turn to false gods felt like a personal betrayal that broke God's heart. God had committed no wrong, nothing that would justify the people's shift in trust and allegiance. Then, as if the people's turning away from God's love wasn't bad enough, the alternative they chose over God was completely illogical. They turned to false gods, to the Canaanite god Baal and assorted idols for help, none of which could possibly give them the security and abundance that God could. As God says twice, the people went after "things that do not profit," after gods that were not really gods. You can almost hear the bewilderment in our Parent God's voice here, as if maybe God would have understood their behavior if the idols they turned to could have actually given them what they desperately sought. But to go after "worthless things" that do not even profit? To choose cracked cisterns which can't even hold regular water over an endless spring of divine living water? It's not just the wrong choice theologically under the covenant, from a purely practical standpoint, it's a nonsensical choice.

If we can see this obvious truth about the behavior of the people of Israel and Judah while judging with the rest of the heavens from the safety of the jury box, then the Holy Spirit and the living Word of God conveyed by *Jeremiah* invite us to go one step further, to step out of the jury box and into the defendant's chair, where we actually belong because we are still committing the same nonsensical crimes that the people of Israel and Judah did. Although we were made in the image of God, we do not yet think about our lives and our world as God does. We are still trying to go it alone as if we have ultimate control, and we are still choosing and building cracked cisterns over the living water God provides, even when there is no real profit in, but many negative consequences from doing so.

Each of you knows better than I what your own individual cracked cistern is – maybe it's your job, maybe it's your bank account, maybe it's a relationship, maybe it's yourself. Being completely self-sufficient and in control is a popular cracked pot for people in our area, as is being considered successful in certain material ways. Whatever you give your ultimate allegiance and loyalty to, whatever you see as the primary source of security in your life, wherever you turn to for calm and for hope– if it's anything or anyone other than God, then that is your cracked cistern, your idol. We all have them. Theologian Paul Tillich said that anxiety is what drives us to make the concerns of daily living such as providing for our families, having meaningful relationships, planning for the future, and finding pleasure and happiness, all of which should be important preliminary concerns, into ultimate concerns.¹ And I think that is certainly part of it. If we are most concerned about work, our anxiety about being successful at work can easily transform our jobs into gods, which take precedence in our lives over everything else, even those we love. If we are most concerned about beauty or youth, our anxiety about having or losing either of those qualities can make the mirror or the gym or the plastic surgery industry into an idol pretty quickly. If we are most concerned about money or pleasure or escape, our anxiety about

¹ See Tillich, Paul, "Our Ultimate Concern" in *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, F. Forrester Church, Ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 32-38.

not having enough of these in our lives can make us seek after money or sex or drugs like the most devout disciples. Whatever is our ultimate concern becomes our god. Therefore, if we don't want to get trapped in an endless cycle of anxiety and appeasement of our finite idols, Tillich argued, we have to make sure our ultimate concern is infinite. We have to make sure our ultimate concern is God.

But I think there is a little more motivating our flight to false gods than just personal anxiety. Tillich wrote in the 20th Century. Now in the 21st, I think that another part of the problem is that Western culture has created a god that is so big and so ubiquitous that even faithful people do not recognize that it is actually a cracked cistern. This false god's ways are so deeply woven into the fabric of all our beings that we worship and serve it without even thinking. It goes by different names, but Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has dubbed this modern day Baal the cult of "technological, therapeutic, military, consumerism."² The core message of this cult which we all receive everyday from the media, from politicians on both sides of the aisle, from businesses and individuals too is that these human created frameworks are the means of our salvation. If we have enough military and terrorist protection, we will be safe. If we have enough money and stuff, we will be happy. If we get sick or depressed, medicine will fix it; and whatever the problem, developing newer and greater and faster and more powerful technology will solve it.

I will never forget when I was serving as a hospital chaplain at the Cleveland Clinic, watching the children of an elderly woman order her doctors to revive her heart when it failed. In the course of one evening, the poor woman who was in her 80s and had been in a coma for a while, had a half a dozen heart attacks. Each time her heart fluttered or stopped the children ordered the doctors to intervene. When the doctors and I both eventually tried to suggest that continuously resuscitating her might not be the right thing to do anymore since it seemed pretty clear not only that God was calling her home, but also that she was ready to go, the children just kept saying, "But we don't have to let her go if there is technology that can bring her back..."

It is so easy to turn to something other than God when all around you the world is telling you how to fix your problems easily and effectively without God. That's what happened to the ancient Israelites. When they moved into the Promised Land the local Canaanites told them that if they made a few sacrifices to the fertility god Baal, they would get healthier children and bigger crop yields. Similarly, when they appointed their own kings instead of seeing God as their king, they did so because it seemed to be the most politically expedient thing to do to protect their economy and nation's security. They did not make a conscious decision to turn away from God. It just happened as they tried to manage the daily concerns of life by taking cues from the cultures around them. Unfortunately, they made enough of these thoughtless decisions to reach the point that they forgot about God's love, God's guidance and God's power altogether.

If we learn only one thing from Jeremiah's lesson in love and logic, therefore, it must be that we have to start thinking about the choices we make much more deliberately and faithfully. We need to remember that the God who made us, and saved us through Jesus Christ, has done

² As quoted in Burnett, Joel S. "Changing Gods: An Exposition of Jeremiah 2," REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR, 101, Spring 2004 at 296.

nothing but love us and provide for us and steer us down right paths by teaching us right from wrong. God has not been an unreasonable or unreliable parent. God has freed us from slavery to sin and the Pharaohs of this age, God has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us through anxious wilderness times, and God has blessed us with more abundant living through Jesus Christ than we could ever engineer ourselves. But if that history, that relationship is not enough to motivate us to make the right choices which God has shown us, then practical logic should. There is not a tool or a drug or a theory or a weapon or a product that can guarantee us the lasting redemption and hope we receive through Christ. It shouldn't take us 10,000 attempts of trial and error, it shouldn't take the kind of exile brought on by our idol worship— enslavement to stuff, rampant systemic injustice and inequity, defiled land and endangered dreams-- for us to learn this lesson. Our Parent God through Christ himself has already made this easy for us by showing us who has real power and who does not, what is right, and what is wrong.

At an ancient manmade well in the heat of the day, Jesus once said to an anxious Samaritan woman, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.... Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." "Sir, give me this water," she answered, "so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." (John 4). He offers this same water to us as well each and every day. "Come, let us reason together!" pled the prophet Isaiah. (Is. 1:18). Let us indeed! I know a book we can read that will help us all for years to come...