

Cracked Cisterns

August 28, 2022

Jeremiah 2:4-13

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

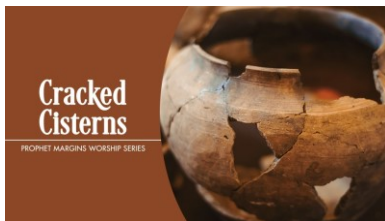
⁹ Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children.

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.

Hebrews 13:1-8 and 15-16

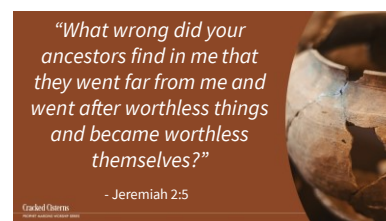
¹ Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” ⁶ So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” ⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever... ¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.



Last Sunday, as we began in Isaiah 1, we heard without doubt that God is on our side. Yet we wander away, we fall into selfishness and sin. We are less than full reflections of the light and love of God within us. In today's text Jeremiah brings God's charges against the people of Israel – from the leaders to the priests to the people. All are living in sin. All have turned inward, thinking their success is due to their own efforts. They do not see their blessings as a gift from God. All of their gratitude has leaked out, leaving them devoid of grace, devoid of life. We can fall into these traps too, especially when we listen to the voices of the world that call us to do more, to gather more, to achieve more.

When we succumb to these lies, when we begin to live according to worldly standards – then our faith too can leak out. To avoid this natural tendency, we must return again and again to the Lord. In personal study and in prayer, in corporate worship and fellowship, and by other means of grace we can seek to remain closely connected to the Lord our God. As we prepare to face this reality and to be reminded about ways to remain connected to God, let us pray...

Turn with me to Jeremiah 2. In the opening 2 verses God addresses the leaders and families of Israel, saying, *“What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me and went after worthless things and became worthless themselves?”* God is asking for a reason to explain why the people have fallen out of love with God. Like all lovers spurned, God first wonders what wrong the people found in God. God wants to know what led to the people to stray and to turn to idols and other forms of idolatry.



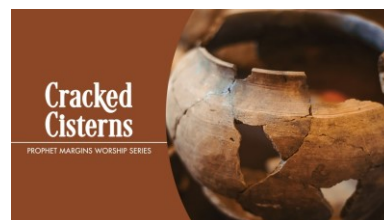
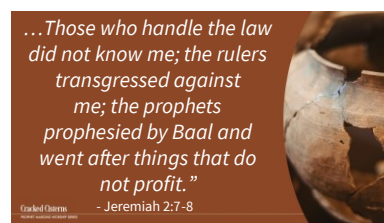
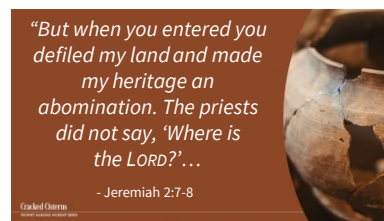
Then, in verse 6 and the first half of verse 7, God recounts all that was done to bring the people out of slavery and into the land of plenty. This sounds to me like a spouse who redeemed their love from a bad place – perhaps from an abusive situation or from an addiction – and cared for and provided for them, bringing them to a much better place in their life. This is what God did. God rescued and redeemed Israel, bringing them out of bondage and through the desert and into the Promised Land. In this new and wonderful place, the relationship was set to flourish. From God’s perspective and from the peoples’ perspective – at least for a while.

There was this honeymoon period. But soon the people forgot their faith, their commitment, the relationship that they had with the one true God.

In verses 7 and 8 we hear God's charge against Israel. Here God states, *"But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. 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."*

It had to have been heartbreaking to God. Quickly the people turned to the local gods, becoming intimate with the ways of the pagans of the land. And those who should have known better, the priests who handle the law, they did not encourage the people of God to turn back to God. The rulers also sinned against God – going to the local gods and temples. The leaders and priests turned to Baal and went after the things of this world – popularity, status, recognition. The priests even led the people in the worship of these false gods.

These struggles have been common to humanity since the beginning of life on this planet. They are common in our lives. Forsaking God we too can be drawn into things that we know are wrong or evil. We know better than that. Yet we gossip, we lie, we cut corners or bend the rules to have our own way. We "forget", or we "ignore" the way of the Lord to gain profit in this world – whether financial, emotional, or relational. Yes, my friends, humankind has long been cracked cisterns.

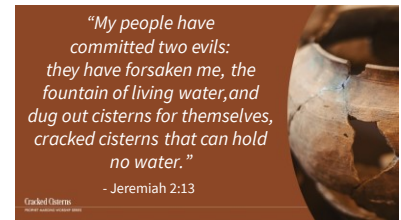


Turning to verse 9, God begins to outline the case against Israel. God first directs the people to go and look at Kedar – a tribe descended from Ishmael. This is a reminder that God chose Jacob and not Ishmael, that God chose Israel as the people of God. God wants them to look and to see what worshipping other gods leads to. The people of Kedar were nomads, wandering the desert, barely surviving. This stands in sharp contrast to the Promised Land, a place rich in resources, the land “flowing with milk and honey.” God invites the Israelites to “*examine with care*” and to reflect upon what they are becoming themselves.

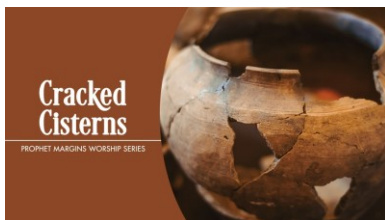
Shifting to a wider view, God asks if a nation has ever changed gods. This simply did not happen in the ancient pagan world. All pagan peoples worship the gods of nature. Even though the god of fertility, for example, would have different names in different groups, each pagan nation remained true to their god of fertility or rain or protection. Yet Israel did not remain true. In verse 11 God states, “*But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.*” Even though it is something no one does, the people of God have abandoned their God for other gods. Do you suppose God looks at us the same way today, when we trade our faith for our wants and desires?

In verse 12 God addresses the audience. Here we read, “*Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked; be utterly desolate.*” The heavens were frequently portrayed as witnesses against events on earth. Here God calls upon the heavenly host to react to these charges. God expects heaven to be appalled, shocked, utterly desolate. Can you picture the jury swooning and fanning themselves as God tells them to get ready to hear the crimes?

Verse 13 contains the two crimes that the leaders and the people of Israel have perpetrated against the Lord God: *“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.”* The people have abandoned the one true source of life, the one source of eternal or living water. Living water was a water source that never ran dry, that flows throughout the year, even in a time of drought. Fooling only themselves, they have tried to provide their own water.



Following the practices of the Canaanites, the Israelite people have dug cisterns – roughly dug holes in the ground that were lined with plaster. These cisterns collected rainwater from the roofs, providing a needed resource for the people. But this was just temporary. Over time the water would become putrid and dangerous to drink. The plaster would crack over time, allowing this necessary resource to drain into the ground. God is paralleling the fate of the nation of Israel. Worshiping foreign gods may seem to be bringing prosperity now, but danger and destruction loom just ahead. The nation of Assyrian is growing in power. Its reach nears Israel.



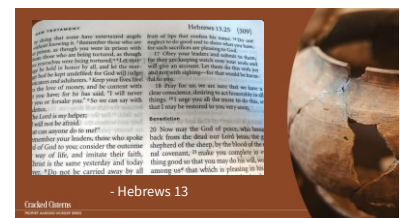
So, in love, God sends Jeremiah to these cracked cisterns, to the beloved people. God raises up a prophet and places the word of God in his mouth. And like Elisha, Amos, Hosea, and Elijah, the prophet Jeremiah will go to the people and speak God’s truth. Like the others before him, Jeremiah has enough spiritual depth to see and hear and feel the trouble in God’s voice and to also see the suffering of many within the community.

The deterioration of the faith of the nation has led to communal suffering, especially for those on the margins. God sends Jeremiah to live among the people, offering hard words of truth, sharing soothing words of God's love, and pleading with the nation to turn back to God.

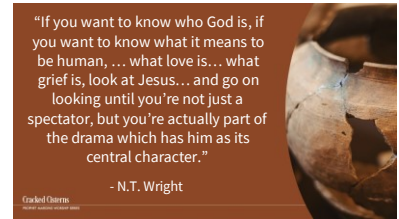
God has leveled the charges against Israel. The prophet calls out for change. Yet the hatred of those that are different will continue. The sick will remain largely uncared for. The poor will grow poorer and will have less and less opportunity to change their destiny. The people have displaced God with false gods. Today, our plight is much the same. Exclusivity leaves many on the outside looking in. Greed has kept access to a really good health care system outside the reach of many people. Self-righteousness has dismissed the plight of the poor, blaming them as a way to avoid dealing with the crisis. Christian nationalism has led many away from walking in the true way of Jesus.

There is still a plumbline hanging from the wall. There is still a basket of overly ripe fruit on the table. There are far too many wild grapes growing in the vineyard. The question remains for us as it was for the people of Jeremiah's day: Is there a prophet around? Is there one yet here to speak for those on the margins, for those without hope, for those in need of a Savior?

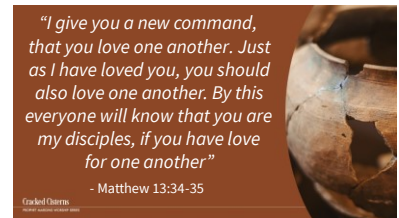
Turn with me to Hebrews 13, our second reading for today. This passage speaks of how we can live as one who speaks the love of God, confident in our faith because we know the Lord is ever with us.



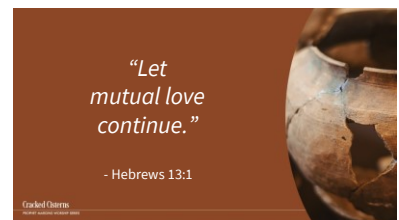
As we delve into what it can mean to live as love in the world, we begin with a quote from theologian N.T. Wright. He was once asked what final instructions he would give to his children in preparation for his death. Here is his response: *“If you want to know who God is, if you want to know what it means to be human, ... what love is... what grief is, look at Jesus... and go on looking until you’re not just a spectator, but you’re actually part of the drama which has him as its central character.”* Wright’s advice to his children would be to become like Jesus, to be a real part of the drama that strives to bring Jesus to the lost and hurting. Key here is the idea of living love out in the world. Wright is echoing Jesus’ words to the disciples.



Jesus, as he prepared to go to the cross, gave these parting instructions to his disciples: *“I give you a new command, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (Matthew 13:34-35). Jesus spoke these words just after displaying servant leadership by washing their feet. These words may sound simple enough to live out, but they are a challenge to live out. This challenge is echoed by the writer of Hebrews, who also appears to be giving a final set of instructions too.



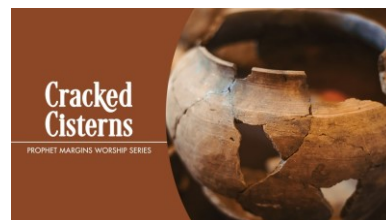
Hebrews 13 begins with these words: *“Let mutual love continue.”* The guidance begins with showing hospitality to strangers. Then the guidance turns to remembering to love those who are in prison and who are being tortured – *“as though you were in prison...”*



as though you were being tortured.” There is a personal, “if you were in their shoes” emphasis here. Treat those on the margins as you would want to be treated if you suddenly found yourself on the margins. It’s actually being a part of the drama called life.

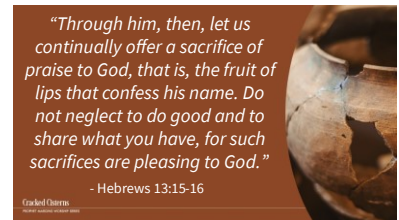
To love others as Christ first loved us is where it gets hard. Christ loved us expecting nothing in return. That is how we too are called to love. To truly love as Christ loved means to love, to offer oneself sacrificially for others, before and without expecting that love to be returned. When we attach strings to how we love – based on what the other could then do for us or hinging upon some other self-interest being met – then it is not Christian love. To love as Christ first loved us is a pure and selfless love. This is why it is so challenging.

Verse 5 of Hebrews 13 gives a great word on how to live this life. Here we read, *“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’”* Be content with what God has given you. Do not chase after the things of the world, especially wealth or possessions. And we are given a reason to live contented: *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* Life can get hard. But it is never lived alone. Christ is always with us. This “mutual love” – it is not a love between oneself and the other. This mutual love is the love between each of us and Jesus Christ. Literally we are to take the love that Christ has for and with us and to share that love with the world, bringing healing to that which is cracked and broken.

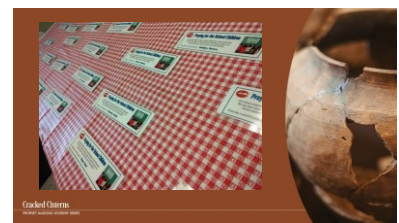


In verse 8 we read this truth: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* Christ’s love never changed, and it never wavers. Jesus loved all who came to him, all who he encountered. May this too be how we love one another and the world.

Our Hebrews text closes with this example. It also speaks to how we are to live out the love of God. Verses 15 and 16 say, *“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”* These words are simple but challenging, easy but difficult. Share the good news with others. Do good and be generous with what God has blessed us with. These things are pleasing to God. We know these things are how we should live out God’s love in the world. May we practice what we know.



One of the ways that we can practice this and remain connected to one another is through prayer. Out on the table in the entry area are our prayer cards for our students. Some of you have already taken one or two. But if you have not, I invite you to take a card or two so that you too can pray daily for the young people who need our prayers. It is a powerful witness to our faith to pray for our students each day. Together, we join to cover these students, the teachers and staff, and the schools in prayer. This is but one way to love God and to love others. May we each find ways to love well in the week ahead. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What gods or idols have you struggled with recently? How did your faith lead you past this temptation? What growth did you experience?
- 2) *Pray*. How could God use you this week to heal someone's "cracks"? Pray for guidance and direction to become part of the drama of life with Christ!
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 14:15-24. What excuses have you made lately to excuse yourself from partaking in "dinner" with Christ?