

September 1, 2013 Jeremiah 2:4-13 Luke 14:1-14 “Cracked Cisterns and Living Water”

Years ago I read about a woman who answered the knock on her door to find a man standing there with a sad expression. “I’m sorry to disturb you,” he said, “but I’m collecting money for an unfortunate family in the neighborhood. The husband is out of work, the kids are hungry, they are behind on their utility bills, and worse, they’re going to be kicked out of their apartment if they don’t pay their rent by this afternoon.” “I’ll be happy to help,” said the woman with great concern. “But who are you?” “I’m the landlord,” replied the man. (source uncertain)

Talk about mixed motives! We human beings often have them. We tend to do things and especially things for others with a sharp eye for the good it will do for us. A high school student may be eager to go on a mission trip or to do community service, “because it’ll look good on my college applications.” A pastor may want to participate in a community service, “because it may attract new folks to our church.”

The scriptures we heard today dealt with what human beings do with the lives we have been given. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God asked the people why they had so quickly forgotten God. Instead of honoring God, remembering God, giving thanks to God, and living according to the ways of God, the people had quite turned away from God. “They went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.” ... “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord. For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

In the gospel lesson, Jesus counseled his followers not to seek honor for themselves, but instead to seek to be humble. It is better to be asked to move up to a better place at a dinner party than to be asked to move to a lesser place.

It seems all too common in our day for individuals to do practically anything to try to make themselves feel more important. We’ve certainly seen this tendency in our politicians. But the truth is, most of us who aren’t politicians have probably found ourselves exaggerating when telling some story about ourselves, trying to make ourselves seem smarter or braver or more put-upon than perhaps we actually were or are... We’ve all heard somebody bragging, trying to impress someone else, usually with the opposite result. No matter how much we can brag or crow about something, each of us will finally have to “move down” if we are pumping ourselves up for our own sakes, if we are trying to get life-water out of cisterns we ourselves dig.

“When you are at a party,” Jesus said, “take a low seat.” Then he went on to say, as he sat as the honored guest at the dinner table of an influential Jewish leader, “When you give a party, don’t invite folks who can pay you back. Instead, invite those who are poor, or blind, or weakened in some way. By inviting these who can never repay you, you will be blessed.”

In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey told of an unusual wedding banquet. You may have heard or read about it in the *Boston Globe* (June, 1990):

“Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and planned their wedding reception. They poured over the menu, made selections of china and silver as well as the meal, and pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive taste, and the bill came to \$13,000. (Remember, it was 1990.) After leaving a check for half of that amount as a down payment, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements.

The day the invitations were supposed to be mailed out, the potential groom got cold feet and begged for more time “to think about this a little longer.”

Hurt and angry, his fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the dinner, but the Events Manager could not come through with a full refund. “The contract is binding. You’re entitled to only \$1300 back. You have two options: forfeit the rest of your down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I’m sorry; really, I am.”

It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party – not a wedding banquet, but a big blowout. Years earlier, this 41 year-old woman had spent some time living in a homeless shelter. She had managed to get back on her feet, find a good job, and set aside a sizeable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat those who were down-and-out in Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in late June, 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party the likes of which it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – “In honor of the groom,” she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, 150 people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night (a DJ donated his services). (In *The Washington Post*, June 24, 1990, and several other sources, as well as Yancey.)

In Jesus’ day, nobody gave dinners like that! They only invited people of influence or interest. Status meant everything and was sharply reflected in where one was seated at a dinner. Preacher Roger Lovette suggested that Jesus did more than tell those at the table that night how to be polite; “He was telling the privileged ones at dinner that they should switch the place cards around. Put those deemed to be of low importance at the head table...” Jesus turned their social snobbery upside down. The place cards were scrambled. Outcasts were accepted as equals. (from Roger Lovette, *The Immediate Word*, CSS Pub, 2004) Just as Mary’s song in Luke 1:52 had proclaimed: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”

Reality check: the only way to get through life well is to honor GOD. There is no other way. If we’re trying to conjure up our own “successes,” or produce our own light, or satisfy our own hunger and thirst for life, we won’t last long. Only God can truly satisfy our needs and lead us to the living water. We cannot do it ourselves.

Several years ago a woman told me, “Every time my mother gets sick, I think of you.” The woman was never in church unless she faced a crisis. For this woman, church was treated as some sort of band-aid or ER, and the way church is treated is usually a pretty good indicator of the way a Christian treats God. While running to God for help during a time of trouble is a good idea, if that’s the only time a person remembers God, that person is not honoring God or serving with his or her life. The cistern is going to be pretty dry. There won’t be much light to shine for others; the life will be basically useless for God’s purposes.

Woody and I have a little house in Vermont, and the basement toilet has been a problem since we bought it. Because it’s low, it has a power back flush, but no matter how many times we’ve had it worked on, it ends up leaking. When we were up there a couple of weeks ago, we had a plumber come, and he said that it leaks because it’s not used often and so the gaskets dry out and crack. If it were used regularly, that would not be a problem. Perhaps that’s a good image for us, because we were made to be in CONSTANT relationship with God, to keep our faith “lubricated” so that we can be useful...

An author by the name of Carlyle Marney declared, “My Master intended His church to be a place where men (and women) become so much like Jesus that people would think they had seen him.” (*These Things Remain*, p. 137)

These days too many “Christian” groups make it very hard for anybody to see the love of Jesus in their actions. Instead, too often, there is self-satisfaction and condemnation of others. Today our nation is worried and unsure as to what we should do about the atrocities in Syria. In lots of ways, the world feels like it’s falling apart, and lots of folks, even around here, feel threatened and uneasy about people who are of the Islamic faith.

But as I read today’s lesson, I can almost hear Jesus tell Christians to invite the Muslim to dinner. Invite whoever is shunned or overlooked or hated. God’s table will not be limited by our narrow, frightened, often ignorant ways. We who would follow Jesus need to make sure that our eyes and hearts are focused on his actions and his teachings.

Honoring God, trusting that God’s cistern is able to give us life, is not easy. Sometimes it makes no sense by the world’s standards. It may even be deeply discouraging. In his book, *Talking to My Father*, Ray Stedman told of an old missionary couple who had been working in Africa for years. They were returning to New York to retire. Their health was broken, they had no pension; they felt defeated and afraid of what lay ahead. As it turned out, they were on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt. They watched the fanfare for the President; nobody noticed them at all. One night as they were still in passage, the old man said to his wife, “It seems wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years and no one care a thing about us, and yet this man comes back from a hunting trip and everybody honors him. It doesn’t feel right.”

When they arrived in New York, the hoopla continued for the President. The couple managed to find a cheap rent on the East Side and started trying to find some way of making a living. At

that point, the man's spirit broke. He sank down in prayer before God and poured out his dismay and sense of unfairness.

Not long afterward, his face changed. His wife asked what had happened. The man replied, ""The Lord settled it with me. I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when NO ONE met us as we returned home. When I finished, it seemed as though God put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, 'BUT YOU ARE NOT HOME YET!'"

None of us is HOME yet, but we are all on our way. The best way to proceed on our way is to remember God, and to honor God by trying to live according to the tough teachings of Jesus, the One who gave up his life for us, and the One who promises to be with us every day, through every decision, every trial, every joy, every challenge. Our Lord's message for us today: God's grace is sufficient for our life and for our death. The cistern of God indeed holds for us the Living Water.

Let us pray: Dear God, you know us inside and out. You know where we're not so sure about our lives, and you see how we try to make ourselves feel important or make others think we are. Help us to be first a people devoted to life lived in you. Show us how to honor you in our words and our actions, May we meet you at the dinner table - in the church and outside of it - with hearts willing to be healed, challenged, and led home. In Jesus' name. Amen.