

Broken Cisterns

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hebrews 13:1-8

Today's passage from Jeremiah tells us one way **not** to do it. Our passage from Hebrews tells us one way **to** do it. What is "it"? Having a redemptive relationship with God is it, the object of life. Or to put it in five or fewer words, "Drink of the living waters."

In the Old Testament book II Chronicles we read a rather dramatic story of the sudden discovery in the Temple archive of a forgotten scroll. Priests read it, and excited by its authoritative retelling of the covenant law of God, bring it to the attention of the new king, Josiah. A young man who wishes to set his little nation on a more righteous course, he immediately decrees that all of life will henceforth be conducted according to the contents of this scroll. This story has more unseen mass than an iceberg. To begin with, Josiah's father and grandfather, the previous two kings, were notoriously corrupt and faithless. They continually battled with the priests and the prophets, who did not hesitate to call them out for their sins. For various reasons biblical scholars believe that scroll was what we know as the book of Deuteronomy. They further believe the priests knew all about its existence. They knew because it seems likely that a school of priests wrote it, probably just a few years earlier. Then they held onto it until a more promising king ascended to the throne of Judah. Young

Josiah proved to be their man.

Josiah would successfully implement the code of Deuteronomy in Judah's national life—for a time. For a few years worship in the Temple and the high altars followed the Deuteronomic law. For a few years the merchants of Jerusalem would not cheat their rustic cousins come to town for the high feast days. For a few years village elders would encourage their people to obey the law. Eventually, however, things would snap back into corruption and faithlessness. As they tend to do. The prophets—who had savaged Josiah's fathers—temporarily praised his leadership. They saw him for those few years as a godly and sincere man trying to do the Lord's will. But then, as things started going downhill again, those prophets started letting Josiah have it, too. One of those prophets was Jeremiah. Today's passage likely dates to only a short time before Josiah first became king, to the time before he attempted his reforms. Jeremiah was displeased.

The prophets tended to see peace and prosperity as the result of national faithfulness. Conversely, they tended to see the threat of war and destruction as the result of national lawlessness. Jeremiah fit this pairing so well his name has become synonymous with rants against corruption. We call them “Jeremiads”. Jeremiah 2:4-13 contains a classic Jeremiad. He reminds his readers that the Lord had brought the Chosen People out of slavery in the land of Egypt. The Lord had guided them through years of wandering through one of the harshest deserts on the planet. They had passed through the waters, through pits, “a land of drought and deep darkness”, a

land that “none passes through”.

Moreover, the Lord brought the people into the Promised Land, “to enjoy its fruits and its good things.” And how did the people repay the Lord? With obedience and righteousness? Of course not. The priests ignored the laws for worship. The elites “did not know (the Lord)”. The rulers sinned. Worst of all, they all threw themselves down at the feet of the fertility cult gods of the surrounding peoples. Therefore, the Lord says through the pen of Jeremiah, he will “contend with you”. The Lord will fight the Chosen People. Indeed, the Lord will fight with their children's children. The coming punishment will last for generations. “Be appalled...be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils.” They have forsaken God, the fountain of living waters. They have turned instead to cisterns of their own making, water storage tanks that leak in gushers.

But has our relationship with the living God improved? Have we learned anything at all from the experiences of those who have gone before us, from the people of Judah, to the Christians at the margins of medieval Europe who worshiped druid “gods”, to the population of the United States of America which invests more annually in candy bars, alcohol and streaming services—many of a decidedly ungodly nature—than it gives to churches? God offers us living waters and we try to find life in all the wrong places. In his two volume work The Nature and Destiny of Man, Reinhold Niebuhr posed the question, “What gods does the modern man worship?” His answer: self, youth and power. We can perhaps excuse his non-inclusive use of

“man” for “women and men” when we know he published these words in 1941. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

God takes us through water and desert, through trials and grief. God plants us in the blessed garden of creation. We abuse it. We ignore God. We wonder why we feel anxious, or dead, or angry or whatever mixture of all of the above we feel. Drink of the living waters. But how do we do that? Where do we find God's cistern? Hebrews 13 gives us one important answer. The first twelve chapters of Hebrews contain one long, sustained argument that Jesus of Nazareth perfectly fit the Jewish prophecies of the Messiah. In Jesus, God had made a new and final covenant with all people who call upon the name of the Lord. Now, in the final chapter of the book, the author lists ways to live in a redemptive relationship not only with God, but with all the people of God. How to drink of the living waters, as it were.

“Let brotherly love continue,” opens the chapter. Please excuse again the non-inclusive language. “Brotherly love” is the traditional translation of the Greek *phileo*. The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament defines *phileo* as “to love, to have deep feeling for”. The great commentator Leon Morris writes, “*Phileo* is a most important virtue in the New Testament. Those linked in the common bond of having been saved by the death of Jesus cannot but have warm feelings toward one another.” No less than John Calvin wrote, “We can be Christians only if we're brethren.” (Or sisteren. See what I did there?) Only when we conduct our fellowship with *phileo*, with sibling love, love characterized by warmth, compassion and patience, do we

experience the fullness of the joy God desires that we experience. We drink of the living waters, we know the redemptive healing of God, when we love one another.

It may seem painfully obvious that love creates a community in which we can thrive spiritually, but sadly, far too many Christian communities and congregations seem to have forgotten the lesson. Making the effort to love one another matters a great deal. So, the author of Hebrews continues, does showing hospitality. I manage a “case”, or household, that contains one adult Afghani woman and her five children. Working with a little financial and personal support from our local Operation HEART and her SNAP and TANFF cards from the State of Indiana, she feeds all those mouths delicious, home cooked meals. I know this because I cannot get out the door of her home without her placing a massive tray with six or seven dishes in front of me. The other day I went there to solve an issue with her Wi-fi and phone and she asked me to sit while she bustled to the kitchen. Before I had reset her router and figured out the issue with the phone, that tray appeared on the low table before me.

Once I managed politely to excuse myself before she performed her magic trick. I sat in my car for a few moments, making notes and texting on my phone. I heard “tap tap tap” on the passenger window. There she stood with a plastic take-out container filled with food. I conceded defeat—if eating excellent food equals defeat. Hospitality is a *major* virtue in Afghanistan, as it is across the whole of western and central Asia, including Israel in biblical times and now. Hospitality communicates care. Through making the effort, when we extend hospitality we tell others they have value

and are welcome. This is why our Christian Life Commission plays such a critical role in the life of our church.

The author of Hebrews extends love and hospitality even to prisoners. In those days jailers routinely abused prisoners. They relied on relatives for food, but the jailers often stole it. It was so bad people commonly decided not even to try to help imprisoned relatives. No, says the author of Hebrews, stick out your neck. Show love and hospitality even to the lowest of the low. By so doing we make the living waters available to them. Several rather curt calls to holiness follow. Stay faithful in marriage. Resist the temptation to love money. Rely on God to provide. Honor your spiritual leaders. Many a scholar has speculated these few admonitions may have resulted from specific issues happening in whatever worshiping community to which the author belonged. Or perhaps they serve as examples for the many, many other calls to holiness he could have made.

Whatever the case, the last and most important point, the best source of the living waters, the redemptive relationship with God, comes last: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." We can live ethical lives. We can obey the secular laws and serve the needs of the lost and broken without faith in the risen Christ. But unless we turn to him we cut ourselves off from his Spirit. We grow spiritually thirsty and, as Jeremiah noted, we try to slake that thirst in futile ways. Drink the *living* waters poured out by our eternal Savior. Try to love like he loved, to show hospitality and all the rest. And God will bless you and this entire church.