

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 1, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10, 2:4-5, 13

Title: Potter's Vision

When I was in seminary, I had the privilege of studying Old Testament with Bill Holladay who was considered one of the foremost scholars on the prophet Jeremiah. Bill helped me to see this Old Testament prophet, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, as a real person worth paying attention to, and someone who speaks to us even today.

We just heard God's call to Jeremiah in which God says that God knew Jeremiah before he was born and appointed him to be a prophet to the nations. It's actually a pretty scary call for Jeremiah, who was still only a child at the time that he heard this call and protests that he is only a boy. God responds that Jeremiah will not be alone, and that God will give him the words to say. But even more so, Jeremiah's call will be to speak to the ruler of nations and to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

It was a tough time in Israel and specifically in the northern kingdom of Judah. King Josiah was ruling but his rule was in danger. Babylon was a serious threat to them. Parts of the northern kingdom has been captured and people were being deported to Babylon. Egypt was also threatening from the south. The king and his advisors were not worried because they believed that no matter what they did, God would protect them and never allow anything bad to happen to them.

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet at a very difficult time, and it was frightening. This was especially so since he was called to confront the government with the words that their actions were contrary to what God wanted them to do and that they risked being rejected by God just as they had rejected God.

The Bible is like a repeating story of how much God loves us and how we repeatedly reject that love. God calls us back, people repent, there is a time of renewed love and passion for God and then once again people go their own way and reject God. Through it all, God continues to love, continues to offer us a better way of life when we are faithful to God.

In the second part of the reading, God is speaking to Israel in one of those cautioning times, reminding the people how they have rejected God and what the results have been. Throughout the book of Jeremiah there are frequent images involving pottery and everyday things to help people understand the kind of relationship God wants to have with them – with us.

One of the images today is that of the cistern. Cisterns were very important to people in Israel. It is an arid climate with very little rainfall and it was imperative to collect and save whatever water they could. The cisterns were critical to their survival. Yet, cisterns were not foolproof. Any small crack would allow the water to leak out of them into the soil and be lost and it was nearly impossible to build cisterns that were absolutely water-tight.

In God's message, God warns them that they have gone after worthless things and made those things more important to them than God. In doing so, they have become pretty much worthless themselves. It is a reminder of what we hear repeatedly in the Bible and in literature of other cultures. Essentially, it is a reminder that we become what we follow, and

that we turn into what we love. Because they have rejected God and made worthless things into the things they worship and value, they have created leaky cisterns, cisterns that cannot hold the true water of life.

A couple of weeks ago I was at Arnold Mills UMC, where their new pastor, Arlene Tully, was preaching on the leaky cistern. I don't remember whether she was quoting someone else or saying it herself, but she said that she believed that we are hard-wired to thirst for God, and I believe that is true. I think that is the point of this passage from Jeremiah. We are thirsty for God – even when we don't realize it.

Sometimes when a person is really thirsty – to the point of dehydration – he or she may not realize the fluids are exactly what are needed and may even resist fluids thinking they will only make them feel worse. Fluids are the only thing that will make them feel better and yet, are resisting the only solution that will work. Long distance runners know that they need to drink water frequently and that not doing so is dangerous not only to their performance but also to their health.

In life, sometimes people become angry with God and reject God thinking that God either did or did not do something that was really important to them. It is easy to reject God and to walk away not understanding that it is really only speaking directly to God, listening, and being open to communication that will allow things to get better. I have known people who spend their lives being angry at God and grieving the death of someone they loved, or carrying the weight of something terrible without realizing that God is the one who gives us the strength to get through the really terrible things and to find meaning in life.

We try desperately to find meaning in life, to find the things that satisfy, that make us happy, or full or joyful. No matter how many things

we try, we are never fully satisfied until our thirst is satisfied by God. St. Augustine of Hippo – in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, nearly 1,000 years later than Jeremiah, said that we are made for God and that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. Recognizing our ongoing thirst for God is far more important than thinking that once we have made a commitment to God we are done and don't need to do anything else.

Given the human tendency to dig only cracked cisterns ought to tell us that we cannot act alone, but that we must seek out others with whom we will confront the world's pain. We are far less likely to build cracked cisterns if we open ourselves to the wisdom and skill of a variety of diverse and capable friends, rather than relying on only one who always tells us what we want to hear. God is the final builder of a cistern that can remain uncracked.<sup>i</sup>

One of the things that Jeremiah would encounter was the belief that no matter what they did, God would never allow anything to happen to them. This kind of theology is the same kind of theology that we find causing damage in other places – the idea that God protects certain people even if it means that others are harmed in the process. It is a theology that forgets that all people are children of God and the pain of one person is as painful to God as the pain of another.

It is this theology that Jeremiah would be called to challenge at the highest levels. He would be called to challenge the king and the king's advisors. In addition to challenging the powers that be, he would be called to try to help the ordinary people without the power to make high level decisions remember that God was with them no matter what was happening around them. This would be a difficult thing for Jeremiah to do, and there would be many people who would be very unhappy with him. In

fact, some would be so angry that they had Jeremiah thrown into an empty cistern and left him there to die.

This “plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing” part of being a prophet is not for the faint-hearted and it is easy to see why it would be frightening for Jeremiah. However, it is equally as easy to overlook the last part of his commission, “to build and to plant”.

That is the critical message of hope. That is the message of God continuing to reach out to us, even when we have turned our backs on God and rejected God. This is the message of God continuing to call us back into relationship, to call us back to the source of living water and away from the leaky cisterns where we put the things that we think are important, but that in the grand scheme of things surprise us by turning out to be worthless.

I think that these passages from Jeremiah give us two important messages. The first is that each of us is called by God to speak, or witness, or in some way testify to God’s word and message in our lives. It doesn’t matter if we are young or old, rich or poor, multi-talented or think we have no talents, comfortable speaking to others or preferring to hide inside our shells, each of us is called by God in some way. Whatever it is that God is calling us to do God will be with us, giving us the words we need to say, showing us the path we are to take, and walking with us.

Sometimes we may be called to challenge the status quo, the “pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow” that Jeremiah was called to face. But ultimately, the Biblical message is one that calls us to “build and to plant” and to give a word of hope.

The second important message is that ultimately God is the only true source of living water for our lives. When we make the less important

things the main thing in our lives, we build leaky cisterns for ourselves, cisterns that cannot receive and hold the living water of life. The only way for us to have cisterns that do not leak is to put God first and connect with other people with whom we can face and confront the world's problems. It is important for us to remember that it is only God who is the final builder of a cistern that can remain uncracked.

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<sup>i</sup> McFee, Marcia. "Prophecies & Pottery: Journey with Jeremiah" Worship Design Studio, Guest resource contributor: Rev. Glenna T. Shepherd. Resources, p. 17