

A few weeks ago, I brought in a handful of nasturtiums in varying shades of yellow and orange from our garden, and grabbed a small vase for them. The vase that I picked out for them is one that my daughter, Susannah, bought for me at a garage sale. I was so touched that she would think of buying something for me instead of herself at a garage sale with her own money, that this has been one of my favorite vases. It is not at all expensive, it might even have begun its life as a bottle for cheap cologne, but it has added value for me because of the giver of the gift. It has a type of bumpy hobnail surface, and to my dismay, as I filled it with water and placed the flowers in it, a small but determined stream of water spurted from the base. One of the little hobnail bumps had developed a barely perceptible crack. My cute little vase had sprung a leak, and it was beyond any kind of repair. With a heavy heart, I placed it in the recycling box, now with the special gift nothing more than a wonderful and treasured memory.

I don't need to belabor the point about cracked cisterns in today's lesson from Jeremiah. We all know about vessels for holding water and what happens to their effectiveness when they spring a leak. The old fashioned song, "There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza" made a little ditty out of such a situation for one generation. When the levies of the Gulf Coast burst open under the force of Hurricane Katrina, we all saw the horrific and deadly consequences of inadequate water barriers.

Jeremiah lived at a time when there was a revival of faith and culture. The people of Judah had forgotten what it really meant to be God's people, and they wanted to be like all those more "popular" faiths around them. Why, the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and the Assyrians all had really snazzy temples and music and colorful tales of their gods. And, they seemed to be prospering! When they had holidays, the numbers turned out. Who could argue with that? And all their countries seemed to be getting very very rich.

It sounds just a little bit like the dilemma of mainline churches today, such as our Presbyterian Church USA. How come we aren't getting the numbers and the dollars that some other churches are getting? Should we forget our heritage and our traditions and our call and our purpose, and just do whatever we can to get people in the doors of the building? What is the "happy balance" between attracting people, and remaining faithful to one who calls us to take up a cross and get our hands dirty and value people that are of no value to the powerful players of the world?

We are told that Jeremiah was called by God in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah. Josiah was a king that carried out what scholars call "Josiah's reforms." He tried to call the people back to a faith that was not like that of the peoples around them, but was a faith that reflected the one true God. Jeremiah was most likely one of the leaders and supporters of Josiah's reforms, though when Josiah died, things took quite a different course. The reforms of the faith went by the wayside for a few decades, and people like Jeremiah became extremely unpopular with the reigning kings.

It was a hard vision for Jeremiah to sustain, but a very necessary one. So when he proclaims that the people have dug cisterns for themselves that can't hold water, he is telling them that the faith they have chosen is not a true faith. It can't sustain life over

time. It isn't what it appears to be. It is just like a useless hole in the ground. Like my beloved little vase, it can't last into all eternity. It has no purpose. It is done.

So when Jesus is invited to dinner at the home of a religious leader, he also sees a lot of hollow and empty practices going on around the table. He sees the scramble of self-importance as people vie for the best seats. He senses that there is a bit of a "power lunch" in the air. After all, anybody who is anybody should be there, and perhaps the host can gain some points with a few of the more important guests. Perhaps some of the guests can make some important business contacts. There is more going on around this table than just sharing food.

So Jesus turns it into a parable, with the point being, "You need to lose the air of self-importance. Your standards of importance are not necessarily God's standards of importance."

As an aside, watch out for the ways one's ego can develop a new strategy for self-exaltation. Modesty can become exaggerated, and then the prize for the most humble can become the scramble for recognition. We would all miss the point of the parable Jesus gives us if we simply made a mad dash for the lowest seats of honor, in the hopes that everyone notices how very humble and self-effacing we are. Some outward forms of humility can be just as self-important as the appearance of egotism.

But then Jesus turns to the host of this meal, and uses this occasion as an opportunity to make a teaching point about how the People of God are to live. "Invite everybody to your power lunch, even the people that can't do anything for you." In other words, quit using people only to get a return on your favors to them. Actually, just quit using people all together. Care about them because God cares about them. That's the bottom line.

Meals in the Gospels tell us a lot about how Jesus reveals the Kingdom of God to us. Bread is important, so important that, if there is a situation in which some eat while others do not eat, then the Kingdom of God is not present. That's right. True worship and true faith cannot exist where some are so important that the needs of others are ignored. To live any other way is to live as if keeping water in a cracked cistern. It isn't true. It isn't authentic. It isn't faithful to the way God calls us to live.

In the early Church, the real test of whether or not the church really and truly included people who were different was not in the willingness to baptize them all, though that was an important first step. The real test came in whether or not people of different ranks and class and background could eat a meal together. This was one of the most shocking aspects of Christianity as it entered the Greco-Roman world. When the wealthy owners of the house churches, the people of rank and title and position, would actually eat beside people of no rank, or no property, or no influence, it set the order of that society on its ear! Then just imagine the shock and wonder when the wealthy ones actually prepared and served the food to the poor and destitute ones! This is one of the most important differences that attracted so many to the early Church. People felt they could finally see the world as it is meant to be. They felt freed of contrived appearances, and free to love

and be loved genuinely. The cracked cisterns of their former lives were gone. Now something full of meaning and purpose had been given to them. They felt truly loved, and truly able to love. They were blessed with the ability to care for others, and to see people with the love that God has for all people.

How does this teaching of Jesus affect us today? It reaches to the very core of our faith and our daily lives. Paul Rowntree Clifford writes,

“...if that is how things really are, if God really does care for every single man, woman, and child in the teeming millions that inhabit the globe, not to speak of the countless generations of the past and those as yet unborn, we cannot dismiss anyone as of no consequence; nor are we entitled to suppose that some are more important than others or that any should be sacrificed to serve some interest which takes precedence over their inherent worth. The consequences of accepting this basic presupposition are shattering, calling in question not only the way in which we commonly behave towards many of our fellow human beings, but the international, military, political, economic and social policies which have been and still are considered reasonable by those who are responsible for them.”
(Paul Rowntree Clifford, *Government by the People?* London: SCM Press, 1986.)

Part of our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition is that the Church is not to run the State, nor is the State to run the Church, but the Church is to be a moral influence upon the society and the State. So how does this idea that everyone is important to God affect what we tell our leaders? If everyone is important, how can we sit by and hear the news that 1800 Iraqis died just in the month of August, and simply say, “Oh well”? If everyone is important, then why are so many children getting left behind in our education system? How will our faith become a faith that “holds water,” and has substance, rather than an empty faith that is like a leaky cistern?

Jesus calls us to gather at his Table today, but Jesus calls us to be by his side every day. Let us use this supper shared in the Spirit to nourish us for our journey, that others might find that they too have a place waiting for them at this Table. Amen.