

Sunday, September 1, 2013

The Sins We Commit: Drinking from Cisterns and Not from the Living Spring

Jeremiah 2: 4-13

For years theologies about God have presented God as being empathetic with human suffering, moved to compassion by our suffering, and acting in ways which reveals God's mercy and grace.

Yet, in affirming God's compassion for us, it is also affirmed that God is absolute and different from us.

Expressed is one significant difference – though God is depicted as having emotion – expressing anger, sorrow, experiencing suffering – these attributes are seen largely as human attributes projected upon God – anthropomorphisms.

We understand God by attributing to God human emotions, but because God is God and not human – God is not really capable of experiencing and expressing emotion, anger, sorrow, and suffering as we do (except in God's incarnation in Christ Jesus).

To believe that God's anthropomorphisms is, I believe, to misunderstand God.

It is not merely that God became human in Jesus, that I believe God is able to experience emotion, suffering, and sorrow.

There is a non-human side to God
– a God-side

The amazing thing about the incarnation is not that Jesus is like God

(Jesus did not come to prove his divinity),

Rather, Scripture reveals that **God is like Jesus**
– Jesus came to show us God and what God is like

And since Jesus wept, Jesus mourned, Jesus experienced grief and suffering – then somehow this must also be characteristic of God.

There is a deep part of God that is “human.” Or rather, we might say that our human attributes are likenesses of God expressed in our human context.

This, I submit, is all rooted in God being in relationship with us, and we being invited into relationship with God.

No relationship can exist without real empathy, real experience, real emotion taking place.

And so, if we believe God is unable to experience what we experience – we might read today's text, Jeremiah 2: 4ff as a statement of emotionless judgment
– a cold statement, laying out the facts of our sinfulness, the charges of our wrongdoing.

We can even find evidence for such a reading in the text – v. 9 “Therefore, I will bring charges against you, again.”

But if we take a moment, to place these words from God into the context of God's relationship with us – though these words are judgment words, I ask you to realize that these are words expressed by a judge who is in a familial relationship with the defendant, with God's people, with us.

God, as judge, depicted here in Jeremiah 2 is a judge who is emotionally connected to the accused.

This judge is personally involved in this case; this judge has a conflict of interest and so ought to recuse himself.

But God does not recuse himself.

Besides the fact, that there is no other judge, I sense that what God is expressing, is the expression of a parent who no longer knows what to do with a child who no longer wants to participate in a relationship with them.

If we regard God's statement, as a statement of a parent, these words take on a different tenor.

Rather than it being a cold emotionless judging statement, it becomes an emotional statement, a cry from God.

God is filled with emotion, filled with anger and suffering, and pain, – at wits end, not knowing what to do with a child that is intent on rejecting everything that constitutes and nurtures the relationship that is between them.

If not every parent, most parents, know what God is experiencing here, because we experience this with our own children as they seek to gain space from us in response to our purposeful but inadequate attempts to love them in the way they ought to be loved.

Yes, we may readily understand, I readily understand, why our kids, my kid, rebel in relationship to us – we may always have thought we were doing our best, but we realize we have not always been faithful as parents
– we are broken parents, selfish parents, making decisions for our own best interest, rather than theirs.

And so, doing the best we can has not always been good enough.

We readily confess our failure in being faithful to our children, in being the kind of parents we ought to have been.

If we readily confess this about ourselves, we wonder why God's people are so rebellious.

After all, God is always faithful.

God has always been faithful, and yet, his children, we his children, his people always seem to be rebelling.

I don't know why we do this when we are so immeasurably loved. But Paul in Romans 7 gives us some words: "I do that which I should not do, and I don't do that which I should be doing. Who will save me from this?"

And so in light of our rebellious tendency,
I believe God's words here in Jeremiah 2 are words filled with emotion – with anger and suffering, with compassion and longing, for his children who have abandoned their relationship with God.

What kind of relationship does God desire to have with us?

I think we often misunderstand what God hopes for in being in relationship with us.

A few weeks my daughter Hilary asked me, if God desires to be in relationship with us, why did God tempt Adam and Eve with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden, telling them not to eat of it? Why did God do that? What does this say about God and us?

Great question.

I have been learning to place myself into Scripture when I read it to see if that gives me a better vantage point for understanding what is going on.

When we stand outside of the text or above the text (in a posture of reading we do not always sense what is going on).

Yes, God did say not to eat of this tree.

Actually what God said is this: “You are free to eat [literally – eat, eat] from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die” (Gen. 2:16-17).

So why did God say this?

Perhaps the same reason a parent tells their child not to cross the street without them.

The child is too young, too immature to navigate a street crossing on their own.

However, as a child matures, as the child grows into a pre-teen, a parent no longer tells their child to not cross the street without them
– but hopes and prays that they will look both ways before crossing on their own
– what they hoped they have learned by being taught and shown over the years.

Maybe that is what was going on in the Garden.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil was not meant to be a forever taboo – because everything, everything that God created was good – it says so in the text.

So this tree must have been good as well. **So why the command not to eat of it?**

We read in Genesis 3 that God spend daily time with the first humans in the cool of the day.

Why would God do that?

I believe God did that because he loved them, God was acting as a parent to them
– instructing them, guiding them, mentoring them, in the ways to live stewarding the earth, growing in their relationship with one another, learning not merely the ways of God, but the ways of being human in the way there were intended to be human.

God was seeking to be a parent to them, so that they might mature, grow, and develop a sensitivity to the ways of God.

And, when they knew the ways of God, the ways of being human in healthy ways, they would be mature enough to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so that they could apply that knowledge in God's ways, with God's wisdom.

God said that Adam and Eve could eat of every tree and plant in the Garden – to eat and eat. Yet, of all these Yeses, of this one tree God said No.

Perhaps God said No, because God knew they did not have the spiritual maturity or wisdom to handle knowledge of good and evil in the early stages of their human development.

- as it turned out, the first humans did not have the wisdom to use this knowledge in godly ways.
- they had not gained the wisdom to integrate this knowledge through an intimate relationship with God
- and so using their own wisdom, they had no need for a deep relationship with God, except for God to have a consultative role in their lives.
- we still struggle with that today.

That is why it is important in raising our children in the faith that we teach them the faith in relation to their physical, moral, and spiritual development

- learning lessons from Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler.

We do not throw all of God at our children at once, nor do we throw all knowledge of good and evil at them at once; but as they grow and mature, we uncover understandings of our relating to God and our engagement of wisdom and knowledge.

In understanding Genesis 3 in this way, we come to a different understanding of God's relationship with us – God's "no's" are not that of an abusive parent, but a parent who loves us more deeply than we can ever imagine.

When we disobey God, not hearing God's yeses, and rejecting God's love-motivated "no's," we find ourselves struggling with sin

The same sin Israel, Jerusalem struggled with:

– v. 13: **my people, my children “. . . have forsaken me, the spring of living water [natural], and have dug their own cisterns** (seeking water for themselves), [but these cisterns are] **broken cisterns that cannot hold water** [the water of life – because do not have the spiritual maturity, know-how that comes from being in a mentoring relationship with God].

We read in John that the gift that Jesus comes to give, in restoring us to relationship with God, **is living water.**

John 4:10 – 14 to the Samaritan woman: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” And in response to her request for this water, Jesus expresses: “those who drink of the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water, welling up to eternal life”

Also, in John 7: 37-38: “Let everyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit.”

Springs of water require a relationship. Cisterns do not.

Cisterns are places where we gather the water, where we keep the water, where we own the water, the water is ours for us to use when we want to use it.

Cisterns are symbolic of our creating our own spiritualities, our own lives without being centered in God
– O yes, we have room for God
– God as a spiritual and life consultant
– who we invite every once in a while to fill up our cisterns.

But springs of water are all about relationship.

Just like manna in the wilderness was a daily gift, not to be hoarded (for when it was hoarded it became infested with maggots), **so too water remains living, fresh, life-giving, when it is not hoarded and held in cisterns,** where it stagnates or leaks away.

Drinking from springs of water is all about being in a dependent relationship with God, a growing relationship in which we walk with God, talk with God, learn to live humanely in relationship with God,

Relying upon the life of God, the breath of God, the Spirit of God who lead us towards maturity, so that we might use knowledge in ways that fosters good stewardship, healthy relationships, good economics, peaceful alliances.

Springs of water require us to go to the spring each and every day
– to walk and talk with God each and every day, drinking from the water that God gives, imbibing the Spirit of God as a daily practice.

God's command not to hoard water in cisterns is not God being stingy with living water.

God's NO to hoarding water is to say YES to the living spring;

It is to say YES to living life, living life abundantly, in relationship with God
We experience the fullness of our humanity in living our day to day lives in open, conversational, prayerful, relationship with God.

Why drink stagnant water from a cistern when we can drink living water from the spring?

May we leave the water that we have been hoarding in our cisterns, stagnating in our cisterns,

And open ourselves to the flowing, healing waters that God pours out in our lives,

To put our hands, our mouths, our lives under it to receive it, to drink it in
– to daily be refreshed in relationship with God.

Jesus came to set us free from our own cisterns and every other cistern that vies for our attention.

Only as we drink the living water, the water that pours forth from the Spring of God, can we learn to live (as Jesus reminds us in Luke 14)
– for our lives to be open to inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind
– to open wide the banquet table of the Lord
– daily eating together and receiving life **from the One who is the Spring of Living Water.**