

Cracked Pots and Vain Guests

Cracked pots and vain guests. Obviously the sermon title is an attempt to make a connection between the two passages of scripture which were just read. Clearly the “cracked pots” is a reference to the last verse from Jeremiah about the cisterns which the people of Israel had dug which allowed the water to leak out. The vain guests are those in Luke’s narrative; those dining with the leader of the Pharisees who Jesus is watching come in while they are watching him. But what connects them, and what more to the point, connects them to us is the question. I think that one way to see the connection is to look at a popular phenomenon of our culture. This phenomenon grew out of a basic tenet of American frontier culture—our focus on our independence. This phenomenon is marketed and called DO IT YOURSELF. There is almost no area of our lives where this tendency is not manifested. If you are a reader like myself, and browse in a bookstore or what has personally more recently been the case been given suggestions for books to purchase by Amazon, you find manuals on topics for self-improvement with how-to’s are available on every topic from your personal grooming to how to raise your family; how to plant a garden; how to fix your car or any appliance, etc. You get the picture—there are instructions out there on how to do all these things yourself. I have also been referred to another self-help source for a problem I have with my cell phone—I haven’t figured out how to set up the voice mail on it—evidently, I’ve been told, I just need to search U-tube for a video and my problem will be solved by watching the instructions available there. Of course, it is more widespread than that—the TV networks have capitalized on the trend by producing whole show series—in fact, there is an entire network devoted to those shows. There are large stores whose sole business model is based on selling items to those folks who are doing those do it yourself projects. We human beings have this tendency to want to be in control; to be self-reliant, even in areas of life where that is not such a good idea. When left to our own ideas about a lot of things, our instincts, our ideas and our attitudes, then these things inevitably lead us to make choices that hurt ourselves and others. These choices create lives and worlds far less joyful, abundant and beautiful than those God intends. As Jeremiah puts it, we trade fountains of living water for shoddy, human made cisterns that don’t hold water. This is the lament from the Lord which begins the Jeremiah text this morning. “Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?” Jeremiah tells us that the people quit seeking the Lord. The Lord says the people perpetrated two evils. The first was that they went far away from the Lord. They did not seek the Lord for guidance; instead of going to the fountain of living water, they looked to themselves to provide water—they dug those cisterns which could not even hold the water they trapped. In other words, they went their own way and thought they could be independent of the God who had delivered them from slavery and brought them through the desert to the Promised Land, the one who had guided them and who had given them everything. Living water is an important image in Hebrew Scripture as it is rare in Palestine. Living water is water that comes with rain. It runs. It flows and swirls. It washes away impurity. It transports nutrients. Where water flows, life abounds. Where water does not flow and stagnates, disease takes hold; where there is not water, life cannot even begin. Even today, when most of us live with water security, these facts about water and the necessity it holds for life are well known so that these images are still powerful. The image of turning

away from pure, living water to water drawn from a cistern which has trapped and held water in the ground seems unappealing, but to do so knowing that the water will leak away and leave that hole dry makes the choice to dig a cistern seem one no one would voluntarily make. Yet time after time, the people of Israel, and the people of today, continue to make that choice. Because over and over again, we think we know better than God. Each of the texts this week shines a spotlight on this aspect of our human nature. As Luke tells it, we think more highly of ourselves than we should. The scene described in this gospel passage has two aspects when the entire passage is read. Jesus has been invited to go to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. Luke carefully points out that the Pharisees are watching Jesus closely, but as the text continues, it is clear that Jesus is also carefully watching these men who are identified as lawyers and Pharisees; those who are supposed to lead the people in the ways God desires. The first event described is another healing which Jesus does on the way to eat. A man with dropsy evidently suddenly appears in front of him. Before doing anything, Jesus asks those who are going with him to the leader's house, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?" In this instance, they are silent when asked. Jesus heals the man and sends him away. He then says to those around who are observing what he does, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" Again, Luke records, they could not reply to this. Their watching of Jesus has not yielded them anything that they can voice in opposition to what Jesus is doing. When they arrive at the Pharisees leader's house, after Jesus watches these Pharisees and lawyers choose their places around the table, evidently each seeking to choose places of honor for themselves, he tells them a parable about self-seeking. Jesus calls out the audacity of the religious leaders attending the Sabbath dinner at the Pharisee's home. He calls them out knowing that they are watching him closely, so this word of rebuke is for not only those choosing places of honor at that dinner, but for all the others who think they know better the will of God. Remember that this story, this parable about a rearranged seating chart at a banquet comes directly after Jesus has healed a man on the Sabbath. Jesus tells the guests, hosts and those insidious watchers alike that God's priorities and pecking order are vastly different from the ones that they have instituted, that they have followed and that they enjoy. Their do it yourself ordering of priorities has not sought to follow what God has told them is important. In fact, in any age, Do it yourself discipleship never turns out well. Often, in fact, it leads to disaster. Wisdom comes in the form of knowing our limits, recognizing our place and need for God's guidance, our reliance on God's provision, and our utter dependence on God's mercy. There is always the need to turn to God for the living water, in ways that reflect and trust God's overflowing goodness and mercy. We should not worry so much about where we will sit at the dinner table. Remember that the ultimate and eternal host is the one who calls us to make sure that all get invited and welcomed to our tables: stranger and poor, vulnerable and powerful. At the table God envisions, all will be fed because the source of our sustenance does not run out of what is needed and does not hold back. Despite our love with the do it yourself concept, do it yourself discipleship is no discipleship at all. Disciples must follow. Discipleship requires a lifetime of learning from God and others who follow. Disciples know that no matter how much knowledge they acquire, there is more to glean from God, the fountain of living water that never stops flowing and giving growth and nourishment. Discipleship cannot be honed via YouTube videos or podcasts or books alone; it must be lived. And it must be lived in community, with the

powerful and the marginalized and all those folks in between who compose the beloved of God. Disciples are to share what they have learned about life and faith in all those encounters that they have with others in conversations as they go about their daily lives as this is their witness to the importance of having that living water in their life. No matter where we are or who we are with, disciples must look to the One who saved us, the One who sustains us,, the One who calls us and the One who sends us, not to do it ourself, but to do what God sets before us. We must always keep looking there, and then decide where to sit, who to include, what to share, how to care, when to act. Otherwise, we become worthless, no better than a cracked cistern. Faithful discipleship requires much help because our temptation is always to go our own ways, to think we know better than God, to go after worthless things. Daily, we need the fountain of living water, and we need to be with other believers from whose hearts living water flows. We need to hear the prophetic indictment of Jeremiah and the reflections of our behaviors which the mirrors of Jesus' parables are because we cannot do discipleship alone. The good news is that we don't have to—God gives us God's presence and the fellowship of other believers to help us in whatever we need...all we must do is recognize our need and turn to the fountain of living water and drink of it. Thanks be to God.