

“Living Waters and Cracked Pots”

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Jeremiah 2

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When I was in high school I went to a lot of debate tournaments. The tournaments were generally held from Friday night until late on Saturday, and they were usually a few hours away from home. Sometimes our parents would help by judging. On one particular Saturday night, after an exhausting tournament and drive, one of my friends spoke up and said, “I don’t think I can make it to church tomorrow. This weekend has just made me too tired.”

Her father happened to be driving, and he happened to be a pastor. He wasn’t angry, and he didn’t react right away, but when he did he very thoughtfully said, “You know, we just don’t miss church for debate.”

Through the years as I’ve thought about that conversation I’ve realized that he had a much deeper theological point in mind than I understood at 16. It would take until I was a seminarian for me to really understand what was going on. And then I realized how profound what he was saying really was.

I was thinking about my friend’s dad as I was reading from Jeremiah. Here Jeremiah is listening to God telling him about how the people have forgotten. The people have forgotten what God has done for them. The people have forgotten God. They have forsaken God and instead put their faith in other false gods. They have become enamored of idols.

In seminary we talked a lot about idolatry. Now, you might hear that term and think that it’s a very judgmental one. It certainly sounds like that judgmental religious language that most of us, myself included, don’t like to hear. It sounds like we have really messed up and now God is angry with us.

You may remember how Moses went up on the mountain top and came down with the Ten Commandments only to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. That’s how many of us think of idolatry. We think of it in terms of replacing God with this very conspicuous other “god” and abandoning God altogether. We think of it as something in the past. Something that was done in the early Biblical times, but that we do not do.

But the reality is much more complex. Both the story I told you about my friend and the story told today in Jeremiah are about idolatry. And for those of us who want to try to live our lives without idolatry, that’s not very good news.

Idolatry is not just about golden calves. It’s not about obvious displays of allegiance to a god other than our God. It’s not always something that can be seen so conspicuously. And that’s what makes it all the more dangerous.

Idolatry is when you put anything before God. It’s when anything becomes so important to you that it begins to take the place of God. It’s when your relationship with God gets put on the back burner so that you can pursue other goals. And it’s something that, in some way, most of us probably do everyday.

You could argue that when my friend wanted to skip church for debate, that wasn’t really idolatry. And in the sense of building golden calves, it wasn’t. But look closer at what her dad was saying. He was telling her that she was starting to put an activity before worshipping God. He

was saying that if this one thing was making her so tired and distracted that it was keeping her away from one hour on Sundays, it was time to reexamine it. He was telling her that her priorities were a bit off.

And that is what idolatry is all about for most of us. It's about priorities. It's about what gets first billing on our agenda. It's about who comes first. For my friend it was about why worship mattered. For Jeremiah it was about what the people had forgotten. And for you and I it's about the daily choices we make about where to put God in our lives.

Every morning I get sent by email a devotional from the UCC. And, when I start my day by reading it, I feel better. I feel focused. I feel connected to God. I feel like I am where I need to be. I feel like I have put God first.

But some mornings I see the email and I think, "Well, I'll get to that. But I have a million little things that I need to take care of first." I need to get into the office. I need to email back someone else. I need to return a phone call. Now, the reality is that the devotional only takes about a minute to read, but in my mind it will be there waiting. I'll be able to come back to it. You know, once I handle the pressing stuff.

That's a form of idolatry. That's putting worldly needs and wants in front of spending time improving my relationship with God. That's worshipping the false god of my own perceived sense of importance rather than our true God. And that's probably something that most of us do.

Because idolatry is about setting priorities, and priorities are those things in which, in a very real sense, we put our faith. Our priorities dictate where we spend our time, how we spend our energy, and what we ultimately make most important in our lives. Our priorities become our best and worst chances for carving out meaningful lives that are connected to God.

And our priorities can become the very things that lead us to false gods.

When I was in seminary, I truly believed that my life would not be complete, and I would not be happy, unless I got my PhD. I graduated from seminary and I knew I was supposed to be in the parish. I knew deep down that God was calling me there. But everyone I really respected and admired had a PhD and I just knew that if I didn't get one too, I would be nothing.

So instead of going down the path where I felt truly called, I instead began preparing for a PhD. I took a second master's degree. I studied for my GREs. I cultivated good references. And, finally, I applied. The acceptance letters came back and I was overjoyed. I picked the most prestigious program and I headed off there, sure that in just a few short years my life would be complete. But then something happened.

I absolutely hated it. I knew the first week I was there. Actually, if I had listened to myself and, more importantly, to God, I would have known long before I arrived. I was spending long hours in a library alone, reading books few other people had any reason to read and writing papers that even fewer would ever see. I've never felt so irrelevant or alone or so far away from God.

Jeremiah talks about how the people have made false gods that they worship instead of the one true God. Well, as much as I would have denied it at the time, I had made that PhD my god. I had put all my trust in it. I was counting on it to save me, and to provide hope. And in the end, I found that it provided nothing but unhappiness.

God knows what is best for us. I really believe that. And that's why God really doesn't want us to have false idols. It's not so much about God's ego, though if anyone were entitled to one, I figure God would be. Instead it's about God knowing that false gods are never going to be good for us. It's about God knowing that our idolatry, easy as it can be at times, will only lead us down a harder road. It's about God knowing that if we choose these false gods, we will only choose our own misery.

When God is talking to Jeremiah, God says that the people have "dug out cisterns for themselves". God refers to God's self as "living water" and they've created their own jars to hold water. Except God says their jars are cracked. Their jars can't hold this living water that is being given to them. Because they are jars crafted not in faith, but in false gods. In false hope. In idolatrous priorities.

A lot of us put our faith, excuse the pun, in cracked pots. We put our faith in things that we think will bring us happiness or fulfillment or a better life. But in the end, those things, like cracked jars that we hope will hold water, just end up being empty. The new house doesn't fix our problems. The new job doesn't make us happier. The sudden influx of money doesn't really add that much to our life. We look down in our jars, and we find that nothing is there.

The good news is that's not the way it has to end. We don't have to end with empty jars. We don't have to even keep the cracked ones we have. Because there is a better way.

It took me two years in a PhD program to admit that I was in the wrong place. There was a lot of frustration in those two years, but I just had too much trouble believing that I had put my faith in a false god. But, the moment I made the decision to leave, I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders. It was one of the moments in my life where I felt God guiding me back in the right direction, and I knew it was all going to be okay. I don't have a PhD, but I do have a happiness I never knew before. I didn't need a PhD to be complete. I just needed God, and I just needed to trust God's plan for me and put it first.

The same is true for so many of us. When we give up our false gods, when we give up the containers which will never be full, which will only leave us dry and without living water, we find that we're really not losing anything. Instead we're gaining the world.

I'll close with this. A friend of mine began to get very serious about his faith, and he left behind a lucrative job to do the work that he was truly feeling God was calling him to. I watch him as he struggles financially to make ends meet. I sometimes wonder whether he regrets his choice. Once I asked him. He just smiled at me and said, "I'm happy. For the first time in my life, I'm happy."

Identifying our idolatry is about more than just an archaic sounding theological concept. It's about our relationship to God, and our relationship to ourselves. It's about finding the part of ourselves that isn't broken apart, because it isn't disconnected from God. And it's about that relationship with God that, ultimately, and sooner rather than later, will bring us true joy. It's about receiving the living water, and being able to hold onto it. That is what putting our faith in our true God will bring. Amen.