

Austin Shelley, The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, September 1, 2013
Jeremiah 2:4-13 and Luke 14:1, 7-14

Throw Away Your Buckets

I grew up on a small family farm in rural South Carolina. Just out the back door and maybe a quarter of a mile down the path from our house was the barn. Several cows, ducks, and barn cats lived there, along with a blind horse named Silver. I never did figure out why Silver was named “Silver” since her coat was *brown*. Childhood mysteries. As childcare standards go, it was a different era. I was allowed to go to the barn by myself at a very young age. I would crawl under the electric fence, run past the bull (the male cow of whom I was terrified), and hop up onto two cinderblocks so I could reach the latch to open the barn door. Then I’d climb up the cedar ladder to the hay loft, swing its door wide, and sit, dangling my feet over the edge. My first memory of God is there in that loft. From there I could see the fields all the way to the horizon. Everything felt abundant: the dusty, unmistakable smell of hay; the warm touch of sunshine. I remember whispering “Thank you.” I don’t know if it was audible or not, but I’m pretty sure it was my first genuine prayer.

Now the chicken coop was closer to home. It was just on the other side of the vegetable garden, and except for late summer when the corn stalks were high, I could see it from my bedroom window. I loved the barn and especially the hayloft, but with equal measure, I hated the chicken coop. I hated our rooster, Henry, who crowed before any human should ever be awake. I hated my daily chore of feeding the chickens and gathering eggs. I hated the smell of chickens and the sight of chickens and the sound of chickens. And I especially hated *the buckets*. The *water* buckets. You see, in rural South Carolina, there is no such thing as city water. Our water came from a well, and my dear grandmother had a somewhat irrational fear that the well would run dry. So we collected rainwater in buckets for the purpose of watering the animals. Buckets full of rainwater are two things: gross and heavy. The water just kind of sits there, and after a while, well...let’s just say I was glad I wasn’t a chicken. Nonetheless, after each rainfall, I would have to use the buckets instead of the hose to give water to the chickens. I hated it. Even so, as a farm girl, I knew better than to wish it wouldn’t rain.

The Israelites knew better, too. Way better. As John Mackay, a former president of Princeton Theological Seminary wrote, “Judea, as the prophet Jeremiah knew it, was a waterless plateau. In no place which fame has made immortal was water so precious. The problem of water supply was so acute on the world’s most famous table-land that the inhabitants gouged out cisterns in the solid rock to store the rain. Brackish and unwholesome though the water in those cisterns was, tasting of earth or stable, it was jealously treasured by the people.”¹

In light of this reminder of the absolute scarcity of water in Judea, I feel a significant amount of empathy for the Israelites when I read today’s text from the second chapter of Jeremiah. In it God accuses them of going after other gods, of forsaking the God who brought them through the wilderness. God lets the Israelites have it for their attempts at being self-reliant, saying that they have “exchanged their glory for something that does not profit.” In a final, jaw-dropping blow, God says, “they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

Certainly this image would not have been lost on the Israelites. A cracked cistern would have been a serious, if not life-threatening issue. If you follow the metaphor, you realize (of course) that God is not telling a desert-dwelling people to forgo their efforts at rainwater collection. Rather, it seems that God, with this loaded image, is calling the Israelites’ attention to the life-or-death situation in which they find themselves. What God desperately communicates is: “You have forgotten who you are because you have forgotten who I am, and it’s killing you.” With this striking image, God emphatically points out that the Israelites are chasing after the kind of water that will never quench the thirst of their souls. Unsure that God will continue to be the miraculous source of life that God has been in the past, they’re breaking their backs to save up a little salvation on the side. Just in case. And we can understand. We work hard—really hard—chipping away at that rock. We eat right and network for our jobs and tend our

¹ John A. Mackay, “Broken Cisterns and the Eternal Spring” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 2 No. 3, 1945, p. 300-301.

relationships, and go to the gym, for heaven's sake, and still it comes—the diagnosis, the layoff, the broken relationship, the loss. We wonder if the God who has brought us through the wilderness in the past is going to show up this time. Don't get me wrong. There's no inherent problem with going to the gym or any of the other things I mentioned. There's no inherent problem with digging a cistern. The problem comes when we think doing these things are a means of storing away a little of God's abundant rainfall for a non-rainy day. The problem comes when we don't necessarily want everyone to know where our cisterns are because we aren't sure there will be enough of God's grace to go around. It's amazing how easily our human-made cisterns crack.

This past week, we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. Like many of you, I imagine, I listened to the speech again, not in Washington D.C., unfortunately, but on the Internet nonetheless. Certain parts of the speech—ones I had missed before—came to the surface for me this time, but of course, there are other lines which always stand out because they have reached iconic status. With the text from Jeremiah and all its water imagery in my mind, I couldn't help but focus on one of those iconic lines: King's allusion to Amos 5:24. This part of the speech is so often shown in clips that I can no longer read Amos 5:24 without hearing King's voice in my head. He says, "We will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"²

What's interesting about this image of God as a mighty stream in King's speech, Amos, and Jeremiah is that it removes any notion that God is in the cistern quality-control or repair business. God does not give instructions regarding the best methods for chiseling through stone or the top products for sealing off cracks and fissures. Rather, it seems instead that God is hoping the Israelites and we will quit all our frantic digging. We can't save living water in a cistern or a mighty stream in a bucket, and the good news is we don't need to.

Today we baptized a baby—a really cute baby ☺—but the water in that font isn't hers or ours to hoard. It belongs to God, as we belong to God. If we tried to bottle it, it would cease to be what it is—alive. God gives it to us in lavish abundance, no need for a bucket. When we gather at the font, we are called to remember who we are and Whose we are. When we gather at the font, we promise that we will remind each other that the Source of that living water will never give out. When we scoop baptismal water up in our hands, it isn't meant to stay there. It runs off our fingers and down our elbows and onto the napes of our necks. It drips off of babies' foreheads as they sleep or smile or cry or scream, but either way we all give thanks because there's more where that water came from. Our faith is not a faith that holds water. It's a faith that shares water with everyone who is thirsty.

In the span of this worship service, we move from font to table. It's rare that we celebrate both sacraments and the proclamation of the word in one fell swoop, so today is bit of a theological hat trick. In case you haven't noticed, our Scripture texts for today mirror this movement—the first with its water imagery and the second with its table manners. I hope we will soak in the sacraments today, pun intended. I hope that when we come to this table, we will remember our baptism. I hope that as we feast together, we will give thanks for the hope that is ours and the living stream which brings it to us again and again and again.

May God's name be praised. Amen.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," Address delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D. C., August 28, 1963. Accessed at www-tc.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/English/mlk_transcript.pdf (August 28, 2013)