

The Self-Made Church

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Jeremiah 2:4-13

“...they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

Movement 1 – The Cisterns of our Lives

We can make our life work. We can force things to happen. We can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and we can make our life work. With a little sweat, with a little ingenuity, and with a lot of persistence and hard work we can make ourselves into something.

The Israelites found themselves in a new country after escaping from Egypt. Read through the book of Joshua and read about the Israelites settling into their new land. Read through Judges, Kings, and Chronicles and read about the people settling and understanding themselves as a nation. In some ways it was as if they were starting with nothing and had to make something. They had to figure out how to govern themselves, they had to figure out how to protect themselves, and they had to figure out how to be a nation that would be respected by other kings and other countries. So they worked hard to make something that would be their country. They worked hard to make something out of the ragtag people that came from Egypt.

We can make our life into something. This is the American dream. This is the dream that pervades so much of our country, the idea that if we work hard enough, we can take nothing and make something out of it. If anyone listened to the resignation speech of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales this past week you may have heard something that speaks to this dream. Gonzales said that even his hardest day as Attorney General was easier than the easiest day in his father's life. Gonzales's father was a migrant worker who had almost nothing. Gonzales was the first one in his family to even attend college, and eventually he worked his way up to the highest law enforcement office in the nation. With the hard work of his father, and his own hard work, Gonzales made something of his life. He lived the American dream, starting with nothing and making something. We can be the self-made person. We can put together our life and make it into something, we can make our life, and we can create our life with hard work and persistence. This is the American dream.

And I think there is some truth to this part of the American story. Weber's idea of the protestant work ethic rings true in our ethos of long hours, long weeks and little vacation. We work hard to make something of ourselves. Yet I wonder about where we think we need to be going. Remember last week I talked about signs of success? Remember last week I talked about signs of living well? Those signs, the big house, the nice car, the trophy spouse, and so on, are the ones we work towards and try to embrace as we work hard to gain that comfortable life and live the American dream. Yet we must ask ourselves a question, are we being true, are we being faithful to the Lord?

The people of Judah and Israel worked hard to make themselves a nation, to find some profit in their work, and the prophet Jeremiah rants and raves at the people about the choices they have made as a nation. In the first couple of chapters of his prophetic book, Jeremiah speaks to the seemed success that the Israelites and Judeans claimed. In

Jeremiah's eyes and in the eyes of the Lord it was a façade. It was fake, false and only on the surface. The people have adopted rituals that foreign nations practice. The people have embraced signs of success that other nations have embraced. The people have worked hard to become like the other nations through their worship, their laws and their identity. Treaties were made with foreign countries in order to ensure that the people of Israel and Judah would be protected. Tributes were made to Baal by the people of Israel and Judah following the examples of their neighbors. The Israelites and the Judeans worked hard to build a nation they felt would be appropriate and acceptable in a global perspective, and Jeremiah is calling it all a façade. One commentator describes the actions of the people as worthless (which is a play on the word Baal and the Hebrew word for "profit") by going after worthless things. It is all a façade. The people of Judah were not being true to the Lord. They were not trusting in the Lord's help and the Lord's hand. They were not remembering the practices and teaching of the Lord. They were not being faithful to the Lord.

In one of the episodes of tragically cancelled television show, *Arrested Development*, two brothers who are trying to run a real estate development company are trying to convince the public and the shareholders that the company is doing well. To do this, the brothers decide to build the façade of a home to show that construction is underway, and to have a big ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate how well the company is doing. But all they had was four walls with nothing on the inside. When the ribbon was cut, the walls came crashing down showing the truth of their accomplishments – there was no substance to what they had done. There was nothing on the inside.

I wonder if the success, the American dream, that we often strive for is much like that home; four walls that look good, but nothing on the inside if we are not true to the Lord. It is success that is held together preciously, ready to collapse. All that we build and gain cannot fill the emptiness that is our life without the presence of the Lord. We work so hard to create a cistern of our lives that can hold all of our fame and our glory, and there comes a point in our lives when we realize that the cisterns we create leak. It is an existential moment when we look around and realize that all we have is just external stuff. It is the Kierkegaardian moment when we realize that life is more than stuff and the success we work so hard to obtain is empty and shallow. We can make our life work. We can work hard and make our life into something, but is it something we want and we desire? We can make our life work, but can we keep our life in line with the Lord?

Movement 2 – The Cisterns of our Faith

So to fill that void, we go to church. We try to walk down a road of spirituality and religion, looking for the Lord. We go to church. We go to church and we try to worship. We go to church and we try to worship and pray. We go to church and we try to worship and pray and live a life that is right with God.

Jeremiah was not just railing against the nation of Judah, but also against the temple and the people who were worshipping. They did not worship the Lord. They did not celebrate or remember what the Lord had done, but had created what they saw as an acceptable form of worship. They were living what they told themselves was a religious life, but it was empty. It was looking at other countries again and trying to fit in and have a piece of their own success. They knew they were supposed to worship, they felt compelled to worship, but the focus was missing. They were a religious people, but were

they God's people? They were a people who went to worship on a regular basis, but did they worship the Lord on a regular basis?

This is a question that drives us as well. We come to church, and we want to say that we are devoted, that we are holy, and that we have a sense of faith, but how do we know? How do we be a religious people who follow the Lord? How can we be sure that we are giving ourselves to God, and not just going through the motions? How can we be sure that we are staying faithful to the Lord? In the shadow of the world and the influence of the world, how do we understand ourselves as people of the Lord? There are many examples of people who go to church on a regular basis but do not follow the Lord. You may know some people who attend worship regularly, but do not live a life of faith. How do we be a religious people staying faithful to God?

Maybe we need something sure that we can stand on. We look for something definite that we can rest on. We look for answers and for confidence. The foreign countries had confidence, answers and success in their religious lives, so their gods were borrowed by the priests and the scribes. And the Lord was not mentioned. Today we offer our surety in a very different way. We offer answers. We offer a sure doctrine. We offer clear faith that leaves no room for questions and no room for doubt. If someone is grieving, or living through hardship, we tell them that God has a reason, and we just have to figure out the reason. If someone is praying, they want to know the right questions to ask God, the right thing to say to God so that the prayer is good and will have effect. At the end of each prayer, just say, "your will and not mine" and your prayer will be a good one... even if you don't mean it. Don't complain too much, don't brag too much, just be humble and thankful in your prayers and they will be good... even if they are not sincere.

If someone is reading the scriptures he or she wants to know what the correct interpretation of the text might be, leaving out any and all ambiguity. So we will offer the answers to scripture, taking out all of the complexity and all of the mystery. This way we can be sure about our religious life.

This is the self-made church. It is a church that rests on the foundation of a sure doctrine and walls of ritual. With a little hard work you can build a church that offers to fill the void in life that so many of us experience. Offer the people something sure that can be a foundation for their faith and then you can build the rest of your church. This is the way we can be sure that we are being faithful to the Lord. If we build the church on these firm foundations of sure and right doctrines, then we have made a church that is faithful to the Lord.

This is the growth scheme of the prosperity churches. These are churches that claim God will bless the faithful with increase in prosperity and wealth. These are answers, these are sound doctrine that can offer people something sure to stand on. It is something that can truly make a church. They have taken doctrines that they claim to be true and have built a church. It is a self-made church with self-proclaimed doctrines that claim to be right with the Lord. As long as you attend worship, say the prescribed prayers, follow the right steps then you can be assured that you are living a truly religious life.

It makes me think of "the Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's great work, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Jesus returns during the Spanish Inquisition and begins to perform miracles. The church reacts negatively, arrests Christ and sentences him to be executed. In this chapter, the church has reversed the three temptations of the wilderness and has

accepted power, wealth and adoration. The Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that he will not let his miracles and his teachings take away all that the church has worked so hard to gain and create. Those in power have created the church, have made the church and they were not ready to let Jesus take it away. The self-made church in Dostoevsky's work has twisted and warped the teachings of Jesus, and still teach people that they are right with the Lord.

How do we be a religious people? We create our faith, we shape our faith and we rest on answers that can offer us surety to stand upon. With the Israelites, we can find ourselves holding our faith in a cistern of answers and orthodoxy, and assume that we are right with the Lord.

Movement 3 – The Cracks in the Cisterns

So we find ourselves with cisterns holding our lives and our faith. We find ourselves with cisterns that we have made and perhaps have some confidence that they will hold our lives together. But these cisterns leak! The cisterns are weak and faulty and leak. All that we rest upon, all that we rely upon is empty, is useless and will not do us any good. The cisterns leak.

Jeremiah is calling out this truth to the people. He is pointing out to them that the very things they are trusting in will not give them any profit. The practices of Baal will not give any profit. The lavish life of pomp and power will not lead to any profit. They are gods and ideas that are no more than a waft in the air and an empty idea to hold onto. They are cracked and broken bottles holding weak ideas that fall out and onto the ground. The cisterns leak.

The surety that is offered through theology in so many churches leaks. The pat answers, the sure answers can only offer so much support and so much guidance. The clear cut, easy to memorize answers can only take someone so far and then our faith gets messy. When you are holding your child's hand, and watching him suffer with an illness that cannot be explained, how can you say that this is all a part of God's plan? How can you rest with a faith that teaches that God causes illness and sickness and suffering when you are suffering, or your loved ones? What questions are you supposed to ask in prayer? Are you supposed to ask God for healing? Are you supposed to ask God for a new life? What if you ask the wrong question? When trying to discern God's divine will, what if you get it wrong and you take the wrong job? What if you get God wrong then where do you go with your faith?

Then, it was a dabbling with Baal that was the downfall of the people of God. Now, as Reinhold Niebuhr would argue, it is a sense of pride that we have the truth, the answers and the sure knowledge. It is a sense of pride that we can build, create and continue to grow the church on the truth that we have mastered. Our audacity to claim to know and rest in our pride that we might be in control is place where the cracks in our life form. There is no profit in such an approach.

We have questions. We struggle. We live in the messiness of life, and sure answers cannot always fit the messiness of the questions. In my second year of seminary I began to face these kinds of questions. I began to question many of the pat answers that I had grown up with in the church. I began to wonder about the confidence that many displayed in their faith, and wonder if it were true. I began to wonder about the presence of God, the grace of God and the existence of God. I began to doubt, and there was not

any doctrine or dogma that could shake my questions. I could not build any church that could support my questions. I could not work hard enough, study hard enough to learn the answers that would settle and appease the questions that were gnawing at my inward being.

The self-made church seems to be built on foundations of rock, but when life happens, then the rock quickly turns to sand and cannot hold up the suffering and the sorrowful. When the money doesn't come in, when the healing doesn't happen, when the promised blessings do not rain down, then the rock turns to sand, and like a house of cards, the self-made church can collapse. The cisterns we create leak.

Movement 4 – The Story on our Walls

Remember the story of your faith. Live the story that has been passed down, the story that feeds our questions and feeds our faith. Live the story of your faith even as you ask and live your questions. The story is the foundation of our faith. It is the foundation of the church. It is the cistern that holds the life-giving water. Live the story of your faith.

This is an important distinction with Jeremiah's questions. He is not just asking where the Lord is. Jeremiah is asking where the Lord, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives, where is that God? Where is the Lord that we have known from our past and from our ancestors? Are we being faithful to that Lord, even in our questions? Our story gives us the frame for our questions. Our story gives us the foundation that holds up the walls of our questions. The Baptist theologian James McClendon says that in one's biography, in the story of one's life you can find a faith and a theology. McClendon urges people to learn the story of others as well as their own story, and the way in which they are grounded in the story read in scripture in order to engage their own faith.

The spirituals are songs based on a story. They are songs that evoke the story of Moses and Exodus, and speak to the situation of the people in the here and now. They are songs that shape and share the story from the Bible, and at the same time offer a shape for the story of the people in slavery, a people oppressed and struggling.

We have a story as a church. We have a story of former pastors leading and teaching people here in the pews. We have a story of reaching out to the children in the neighborhood, bringing them to the chapel on Lancaster Street so that they may learn about Christ. We have a story of being a Baptist presence here in Bryn Mawr, calling people to a believer's baptism of new life. We have a story of a church offering support to those who lost their loved ones in World War I and WW II. We have a story of a people taking a chance to listen to the Lord, to follow the Lord, and to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. When we ask our questions, we ask them in the context of our story. We ask, "Where is the Lord who led the founders of this church?" We ask, "Where is the Lord who guided my grandparents as they struggled and wrestled in a strange new land." We can ask, where is the Lord who spoke through Jeremiah, who spoke through Isaiah, and who speaks to me. We can ask, where is the Lord who came down, and walked among us, who led us, who taught us, and who died for us on Calvary? We ask where is the Lord of our ancestors, of our past, of our present, and leading us into our future.

The story guides our questions, the story guides our musings. The story shapes our faith, live the story of your faith.

Movement 5 – A Foundation of Questions

Take risks with the questions of your faith. Take risks with your wonderings, your musings, and your questions. Jeremiah is asking about the questions that people are supposed to be asking. He is wondering why no one is asking a question of where the Lord might be. When the people of the nation were wondering if they were to enter into a treaty with other nations, no one asked “where is the Lord.” When the people were deciding how to be a country, how to be a people no one asked, “Where is the Lord.” The question was missing, and the question is essential, for it is the foundation of the faith of the Israelites.

If you ever sit at a Jewish Seder a child asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” (the Mah Nishtanah). It is a question that sets the whole evening in motion. It is a question that leads to knowledge and a relationship with God. It is a question that drives the faith of the people. Walter Bruggemann claims that the question in Jeremiah challenges the supposed doctrine and orthodoxy that was wrongly leading the people. Our questions today can continue to push and drive us in our faith.

We live with questions. We wrestle with questions. We face questions daily. Let those questions build off of your faith. Let your questions guide your growth in your faith. Let your questions articulate the messiness of your life and then bring God into your life. Let your questions lead you to wonder about scripture as you read and engage the Holy Word. Let your questions lead you to dig deeper and deeper into the mysteries of scripture. Let your questions lead your faith. The theologian Paul Tillich offers a method of theological inquiry called correlation that moves from the question to the gospel and back again to the question. Let your questions grow the foundation of your faith.

When you are suffering, do not settle with the answer that things will work themselves out, or that God has a plan. Push and push and push until you are face to face with the Lord. Ask, “Where is the Lord,” when you are facing trauma and turmoil. When you are struggling in your faith, when you are struggling as a church, ask, “Where is the Lord.”

Questions are is such a powerful part of our story. The reformers, the rabble-rousers asked questions and challenged orthodoxy. From Martin Luther to Thomas Helwys to Roger Williams, again and again the question was made in response to the accepted practices of a people. I wonder if when this church was found if such a question was asked. I wonder if when the church was faced with a difficult decision if someone asked, “Where is the Lord.” I would venture to say, yes. I would venture to assume that such a question was asked and the members of this church listened for the presence of the Lord.

How do we be a people of faith? How do we be a church? By asking questions. By asking where God is, how God is active and how God is guiding us as a people. Take a risk with your questions, voice your question and let your questions guide your faith.

Movement 6 – Life-giving Water

From our questions and from our story, find the sustaining life-giving water of faith. This is hope our questions yearn for and our story offers. Jeremiah is reminding the people that this is what the Lord offers. He is calling on them to remember and to embrace the presence of the Lord as they strive to be a people of the Lord. It is a life giving water that saw them out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into what they now know as their homeland, and being faithful to the Lord holds that life-giving water. We live our questions in the story of Christ and we find the water from Christ that promises to quench our thirst. When we are mourning, we ask, where is the Lord who wept and the news of Lazarus' death? When we are raising our children, we ask where is the Lord who called the children to come him? When we are working for peace we ask, where is the Lord who declared, "blessed are the peacemakers?" When we are challenged by the establishment that keeps people down, we ask where is the Lord who reached out to the women and the outcastes when no one else would? When we are striving to live a true and full life, we ask, where is the Lord who brought a new way of living, a new way of understanding God's law? Where is the Lord who sat with his followers at that final night? Where is the Lord who gave his life on the cross? Where is the Lord who rose again and returned triumphant? Where is the Lord who offers us grace, who offers us forgiveness and who offers us life? Where is the Lord?

Let those questions lead you to the life-giving water. Let those questions lead you to the presence of the Lord. Let those questions lead you to the cisterns that will hold water, the cisterns that will offer us life. Live the story of the Lord. Let your faith come out of the story of the Lord and you will have life, and you will be children of God. We will be a people following the Lord. Come to the table and live that story. Come to the table with the questions of your faith and listen for an answer from the Lord. Come to the table and live. Come to the table and live.

AMEN