Invitation to the Table

The late Walter Brueggemann, preeminent Old Testament scholar was a strong prophetic voice to our generation—a voice that will be sorely missed.

Someone has summarized his understanding of communion as this:

“Christians: people who survive on broken bread and don’t have to buy the whole bakery.”

Our communion hymn is #390, “Lord of Our Highest Love!”

Pastoral Prayer

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
PSALM 119:105

God of light and truth, Lord of integrity, help us to be a people of honesty and purity of heart, with your truth as the foundation of our work and relationships. Grant us courage to choose the right thing, even in difficult circumstances.

Guiding Christ, whose path is narrow and straight, when we stray from your way, guide us back and make us aware of the grace to your forgiveness as you restore us in your direction.

Spirit of holiness, we pray not only for ourselves, but also for those who make decisions and establish policies that define our national life. Instill in them your wisdom and your vision that they may govern with compassion, justice, and true integrity, reflecting your character through their work.

Your servant reminds us in the Psalms:

Joyful are people of integrity,
who follow the instructions of the Lord.
PSALM 119:1 NLT

May we know that joy, in the name of the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen,

Living with Cracked Cisterns

JEREMIAH 2:4-13 (NRSVUE) *Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.* 5 *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?
6 *They did not say, "Where is 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 deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?"
7 *I brought you into a plentiful land*
to eat its fruits and its good things.
But when you entered you defiled my land
and made my heritage an abomination.
8 *The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"*
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the ruler transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.
9 *Therefore once more I accuse you,*
says the Lord,
and I accuse your children's children.
10 *Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look;*
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.
11 *Has a nation changed its gods,*
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.
12 *Be appalled, O heavens, at this;*
be shocked; be utterly desolate,
says the Lord,
13 *for my people have committed two evils:*
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

The Word of God for the people of God!

Last Monday, a Christian pastor and teacher wrote: "As summer ends, those of us who live in the Washington DC area wonder what the future will bring. Troops and ICE agents patrol the city streets, putting at risk law-abiding citizens as well as undocumented residents," *(and I add: the overwhelming majority of whom, aside from their undocumented status, also are law-abiding)*. "Leaders speak dismissively about the history of slavery and attempt to erase its legacy, while institutions such as universities, the press, and churches confront threats reminiscent of 1930s Germany."

Christians across the theological spectrum are not immune to words and actions of cruelty; not above adoring some transactional and retributive god and assuming they are exempt from accountability for social injustice simply because "once upon a time" they said a few words and were baptized.

There is a difference between "being saved"—an abstract status—and "being Christian"—a behavioral demonstration of that status. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "what does it mean to *be* a Christian *now*?"

The church is called to cultivate a community rooted in love and compassion and justice—in other words, to usher in the kingdom of God *on earth as it is in heaven;* instead, Christianity is reduced to an individualized concern for getting to heaven when we die while trivializing ethical relationships and justice.

And while Christians are called to maintain a critical distance from political power

and to refrain from blind, partisan endorsement of systems that merge Jesus with policies that contradict the very values and ethics he taught, it's always tempting to fall into the trap of uncivil polarization—dividing the world into winners and losers, right and wrong, good and evil, us and them.

We think of ourselves as benevolent progressive Christians—and, for the most part, I truly believe our intentions are pure; but we sometimes struggle to be effective because it's so tempting to demonize and vilify those who hold different viewpoints even within our own tribe. Small differences among progressives get magnified and become fodder for "calling us out" and are used to divert attention from inhumane injustices.

While today's words from Jeremiah are strong in their critique, they also challenge any self-righteous and divisive behavior on our part. We are called to model Jesus; the one who was humble, *and yet not passive*. Followers of Jesus are called to humility and active engagement, and our effectiveness depends on avoiding distractions from the pursuit of justice. It's difficult to do that without becoming what we oppose.

Jeremiah's metaphor of living waters is both poetic and tangible. It summons images of clear, running rivers and streams. God fills our cup with living waters, but we prefer to find our own water and dig our own cisterns, thinking we can be self-sufficient and independent. But human cisterns have cracks in them.

The prophet's critique is timeless: so many turn away from the true source, building "cracked cisterns that don't hold water." It's easy to condemn the failings of others—their pursuit of power, greed, and individualism—while ignoring our own shortcomings. We humans tend to gather in tribes and congratulate each other for being on the "right side," even when our words and behaviors lack the gifts and graces of godliness.

Calling ourselves Disciples of Christ means striving to embody humility and courage—following the one who was humble but not passive. And Jeremiah's rebuke prompts self-examination: have we unknowingly built our own idols? Would Jeremiah accuse us of following false gods: consumerism, financial security, prestige?

I remember an illustration from a fellow seminarian's senior sermon: we sometimes yield to the siren call of self-righteousness, thumping over the false god's of power, greed, competitiveness… but we seldom realize when our "thumpers" have become our own false gods.

It's easy to pick out the idols of our opponents—and every ideology has its own idols—but for Jeremiah and the God of the prophets, idolatry begins when elements intended to point to God end up pointing to themselves—when communion no longer points to a cosmic expression of love but becomes, itself, that which fulfills our yearnings—when a political party no longer is a participant in respectful debate seeking to discover and implement values and practices that enhance and enrich life for everyone but, instead, assumes its own ideology must prevail at any cost; when "winning the fight"

becomes more important than enriching the lives of people.

God is the God of life, offering endless possibilities for mutual pursuit of behavior and relationships of respect and integrity and interdependence without exception, citizen and immigrant, friend and foe. Our founding documents echo those same values: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

We are called into loving relationships with one another and with Jeremiah's God and our God. We were never intended to be isolated, individual actors in some cosmic soap opera or competitors in some celestial game show.

Any other approach ends up dividing nations, harming fellow humans, and leaving the earth in waste. Healing of the nations and the restoration of integrity require creative interdependence, humility before God, and loving relationships with one another.

And those qualities require deep, intense spiritual discipline: prayer without ceasing; study of the word, not to confirm what we already believe, but to engage in ongoing, living growth toward the Christ who was humble but not passive.

What false gods call to our collective consciousness as Americans? And how confident are we—truly confident—that we are free from idolatry? Where are we tempted to "own" the earth and control the future? The God of the prophets cares about what we do and feels the pain of the earth and those who suffer injustice. The divine pathos, as Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, means that human behaviors that cause poverty, pain, and disenfranchisement also cause God pain. And we can never love God in the abstract. We love God best when we love what and whom God loves, and that includes loving our enemies.

And by both necessity and divine calling, Christians will live in human community as humble—*but not passive*—servants of our creator, whose living waters flow without ceasing.

Jeremiah's prophecy is not just a rebuke; it also is an invitation. God's heart aches for reconciliation. The call is to return to the fountain, to seek the living water once more.

Jesus echoes this theme centuries later: "If anyone thirsts, let them come to me and drink." Though Jeremiah's words are heavy, they are woven with hope. God does not abandon the people. The fountain is still flowing, ready to quench the deepest thirst. Turning around is always possible; restoration always awaits.

Pray with me.