

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Cracked Cisterns

In nomine...

It's good to be back here with you: a month straight of pulpit swaps was too much! But I heard from a number of you how much you enjoyed those different preachers. We recorded most of their sermons and posted them online, where I got to listen to them, too. Part of me wishes I was free this evening to go down to Salem to hear Fr. Chuck again! But church is about relationships even more than it's about the preaching, and I am really glad to be back home with you again.

I. Intro

This week a big group of us from St. Thomas' attended a lecture at Holy Trinity, Wenonah. We filled up a whole row! It was delightful to be gathered with friends from other churches around the Diocese from at least as far away as Princeton. The speaker that night was a friend of Fr. Ben's, David Zahl. David talked about his new book with a long title. It's called: *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It*.

I read Zahl's book earlier this summer and I enjoyed it because it spoke to my own experience of life and faith. The gist of his message is this: we spend a lot of time "Looking for love in all the wrong places." We want to know that we are good people, that we are worthy, that our lives have meaning and purpose. So we look in lots of different places for these things. By "Seculosity," David is referring to those places that promise that fulfillment we seek, but which are ultimately unable to deliver it. Things like "career, parenting, food, politics, and romance." Alongside those seculosity is religion, the pursuit of God, which has one thing all those seculosity lack: absolution of our failings and unconditional love.

II. Thesis

Coincidentally, or not so coincidentally, that is exactly what our first reading today is about! In today's little piece of Jeremiah, you can hear God mourning as God recounts the things God has done for God's people. God has given them safety and plenty – and yet the people failed to acknowledge God's kindness, God's faithful provision, the sufficiency of what God gave them. Have you ever had a child that did this? Instead the people went off after the latest, greatest fad, the thing everyone else was doing, the thing that was ultimately as useful as a fidget-spinner or as spiritually satisfying as The Emoji Movie.

So God compares the people and their ineffective strategies for spiritual fulfillment to broken cisterns. God, the living fountain flowing with sweet, fresh water is dying to sate their thirst. But their trust in and attention to God is such that instead of drinking from the fountain, they feel the need to expend prodigious amounts of time and energy digging deep holes in the ground, lining them with dried clay, and then finding they still won't hold water.

This is a very modern experience, even for those of us on city water. How many things are there in your life in which you are tempted to invest your identity, your feeling of worthiness and goodness? What are those things that are SO IMPORTANT in your life that when someone says the wrong thing about it, your temper flares up? That's a warning sign that this may be an area of secularity or, in churchy language, idolatry.

Politics comes to mind right away, doesn't it? Politics becomes poisoned and hyper-partisan when voting the "right" way is no longer a matter of personal opinion or honest disagreement, but a question of good and evil, purity and depravity. Then politics has become a cracked cistern, promising you meaning and purpose, but never actually delivering. Because whichever candidate wins, you are still you, and they're still going to make mistakes.

Another common cracked cistern is child-rearing. Sometimes as parents we pour ourselves into our children and we start to believe that making certain decisions the right way or wrong way is the most critical thing EVER.

Since we're all gathered here together as a church, I suppose religion is a cracked cistern that must be mentioned. You may remember a few weeks ago in church we read from another prophet, Isaiah, who talked about religion, and about God's disgust with the sacrifices and other pieties of a people who didn't know how to love and cherish their neighbors. We can be so concerned about how we do our religious activities, or even about what ideas or creeds we hold forth, that we lose sight of the purpose of religion and creed: which is to draw us close to God and to one another. We can get lost in looking for self-worth in our religiosity instead of in God's love for us.

Nearly all these cracked cisterns, these "seculosities" as David Zahl calls them, are good things. Politics, parenting, and religion are all excellent things, worthy of our attention and our best efforts. Even pop culture, movies, cell phones and sports cars can be authentically good. But none of these things can hold your whole identity, your whole worth. None of them can tell the whole story of your belovedness.

This is why God, through Jeremiah's oracles, laments that God's people "went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves." We become what we have our eyes fixed on. We reflect that which we hold most dear.

III. Good News / Invitation

Now the whole point of the Christian religion is that you start out forgiven. Before you were ever born, before you committed your first sin, your first failure, before you ever fell short of someone else's standard – Jesus died for you. God showed God's love for you. You started out forgiven and you're still forgiven today. That's not changing or going away. God's love for you is still hanging out there, waiting for you to claim it. You are dear to God. But what's most dear to you?

My continual struggle as a Christian is to keep my eyes and my affections fixed on Christ. I've noticed that when something happens that causes me to lose my sense of humor, something is too important to laugh about, that thing may have become a cracked cistern. That may be exactly what is distracting me from God's love for me.

So how can I fix my gaze on Christ? Well, that's why I come to church and hang out with you. That's why I spend time in prayer, in the reading of scripture, and in service to my neighbor. To practice gazing in God's direction, experiencing myself as being in God's presence. With the hope that I will take that memory and that growing experience of God's loving gaze with me through every hour of my week. I try to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus – so that my life will reflect his.

God's love is a lot like listening to opera, visiting historical sites, or practicing martial arts. The more you learn and practice, the better it gets, the more real it becomes for you. You can start exactly where you are. There's nothing for you to earn or measure up to. It's just waiting for you to claim it.

The message of Jeremiah, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the story of the Bible is this: Your reward has already been laid out. It has your name on it. You are good enough. You are important enough. You are loved enough. You are enough. You have already won.

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