

Cracked Cisterns

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1; 7-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this second last Sunday of summer, we encounter two texts that are difficult in different ways.

We have Jeremiah's scathing rebuke of his people for their idolatry and Jesus' uncomfortable teaching on humility at a dinner party.

Both are hard passages in their own ways, but I am convinced that both hold out good news. Hard news can also be good news.

Let's start with humility and end with idolatry.

I recently came across an article on humility in *The Atlantic*. It was written by David Brooks and was called "Truly Humbled to Be the Author of This Article." He wrote it in response to a tweet that he saw from someone who had tweeted that they were "humbled" to receive some prestigious award:

Whenever I feel particularly humble, I tweet about myself. I have never earned an honorary degree from the London School of Economics, but if I ever did, I'd certainly... want to let the world know how humbled the experience had made me. I'd tweet my humility, Instagram my humility, and maybe even TikTok it if I could find dance moves humble enough to make my point...

I have spent years studying the fine art of humility display... If you've spent any time on social media, and especially if you're around the high-status world of the achievatrons, you are probably familiar with the basic rules of the form. The first rule is that you must never tweet about any event that could actually lead to humility. Never tweet: "I'm humbled that I went to a party, and nobody noticed me." Never tweet: "I'm humbled that I got fired for incompetence."

The whole point of humility display is to signal that you are humbled by your own magnificent accomplishments. We can all be humbled by an awesome mountain or the infinitude of the night sky, but to be humbled by being in the presence of yourself—that is a sign of truly great humility.

The second rule is that you must always use the word *humbled* when the word *proud* would actually be more accurate. For example:... “Truly Humbled to be keynote speaker at [this prestigious conference],” “Humbled that Cameron Diaz is giving me a ride to Bradley Cooper’s surprise birthday party. Just thought I’d mention it.” The key to humility display is to use self-effacement as a tool to maximize your self-promotion...

The great thing about humility tweets is that you’re not trying to show that you are better than anybody else. You are showing that you are a regular, normal person, despite the fact that your life is so much more fabulous than those of the people around you... It’s easy to be humble when you’re most people. But just think about how amazing it is to be humble when you’re as impressive as you!

Well, Brooks is obviously writing with his tongue firmly in cheek here. This is pure satire. He concludes his article like this:

[W]e have entered an even greater age of humility. [In the past], people danced around the fact that they were humblebragging. Now the humility is explicit, assertive, direct, and unafraid. We blaze forth so much humility that it’s practically blinding. Humility is the new pride.¹

Humility is the new pride. Ouch.

But maybe it’s not such a “new” thing.” Jesus famously told the story of the Pharisee in the synagogue who loudly thanked God for how awesome he was, how unlike that pathetic tax collector over there in the corner (Luke 18:9-14).

The temptation to tweet about it might be new, but the disposition is as old as humanity itself.

¹ https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/humility-tweet-self-promotion/661444/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

Let's look at our gospel text for this morning. David Books satirically said, nobody would ever tweet: "I'm humbled that I went to a party, and nobody noticed me."

This is sort of what Jesus seems to be advocating.

His parable begins at a party. This is in keeping with a prominent theme in Luke's gospel. In Luke, it seems like Jesus is always up for a party. There are more references to eating, banquets, and tables in Luke than any of the other gospels.

Indeed, Jesus is even accused by the Pharisees of being a "drunkard and a glutton," a charge that he doesn't really refute (Luke 7:34).

Here, at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, Jesus tells a story about a wedding banquet.

In that time and place, a wedding feast would have had a set of protocols. People would recline on something like couches for meals and the centre couch would be the place of honour. Whoever sat there would often be determined by wealth, power, or office.

(Think of most portrayals of the Last Supper, where Jesus is at the centre with the disciples fanning out in either direction.)

If someone more prominent arrived later in the party, someone of a lesser rank would have to make way. This would obviously be a little humiliating.

So Jesus is in one sense giving some fairly practical advice. It's better to be invited to a better position than demoted to a lower one.

But he's also pointing to a deeper disposition to cultivate. Don't seek status by conventional means. Don't try to draw attention to yourself. Don't do the first century equivalent of tweeting, "I'm so humbled to be at this seat of prominence at this magnificent occasion."

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled," Jesus says. And the inverse is also true, if not now then in the end: "All who humble themselves will be exalted."

Humility is to be the default disposition of the kingdom of heaven.

And this of course fits with the pattern of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

This is nowhere more clear than in Philippians 2, the famous Christ hymn of the early church which celebrated the one who though he existed in the form of God, took on the form of a slave and became obedient unto death, and who was *therefore* exalted and given the name above every other name.

Jesus models what he teaches.

But he doesn't stop by saying, "don't seek the best place at the table when you're a guest." He goes on to talk about what you should do when you're the host.

"When you host a meal, don't just invite your friends and your relatives and your social equals," he says. "Don't just invite with the expectation of reciprocity."

I think many of us know a thing or two about the invitation that comes with an implicit expectation. *I invited you, now you have to invite me! Your serve!*

Instead, Jesus says, invite those who can't pay you back, those who won't give your social status a boost, indeed, those who might sent it in the opposite direction! Invite the poor, the crippled, the the lame and the blind. Invite those who don't often get invited anywhere.

In other words, upend the whole system of the first part of the parable where table places and guest lists are defined by social hierarchies.

These are hard words. We tend to like hanging out with people who are like us, don't we? People who share our economic status, people whose politics and religion and values roughly map on to our own, people who have had interesting experiences, that are lively and interesting conversation partners.

The people that Jesus tells us to invite to the table may not check any of these boxes. It might make the meal more awkward. There might be some bad table etiquette, some lulls in the conversation.

Or, who knows, we might just be surprised! We might discover an unexpected surprise or two. We might find that we had a few prejudices and stereotypes lurking beneath the surface.

(If inviting people over for dinner seems a bridge too far, we might start by mixing up our seating arrangements at church potlucks or coffee hours!)

In any case, Jesus' table is indeed a radical one. Debie Thomas puts it well:

When we dare to gather at Jesus's table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us. There's nothing easy or straightforward about this; it requires hard work over a long period of time. To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our presidential elections, and that can be tiring. But it's what we're called to do — to humble ourselves and place our hope in a radically different kingdom.²

Again, Jesus models what he teaches.

Jesus consistently oriented himself toward the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Those who were not esteemed, and at times were even actively reviled.

In this parable, Jesus is not *just* giving his followers a to-do list. He's certainly saying that humility and an orientation toward the outsiders is to be our disposition.

But even beyond this, he's describing the kingdom that he himself is bringing about in his own ministry.

You might be wondering how the passage from Jeremiah connects with all this. What does an indictment of the people Israel for idolatry have to do with Jesus' call to humility?

Quite simply, I think it is this. There is a humility appropriate to the human condition that goes beyond the pragmatic and the strategic. It is a necessity if we are to position

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2334-places-of-honor>

ourselves properly before God and neighbour and to avoid the idolatry that comes so easily to us.

In Jeremiah's time, it was the pursuit of the gods of their neighbouring nations, gods who are "no gods at all."

He uses a memorable image of idolatry as turning from the living water of the living God to cracked cisterns of our own making.

A cracked cistern calls to mind water that is stagnant, not fresh. It is leaky and tenuous, always having to be refilled. It can't do what it is supposed to do.

The metaphor points to a people who have turned away from the source of Living Water, and now find themselves in spiritual crisis. Listen to how one commentator describes it:

They have long since turned from the deep well of God's goodness and have, instead, tried to quench their deepest thirst with the thinnest of tonics, with leaky pots full of maggoty gruel: elixirs of gold; drafts of pagan alliances; double shots of worldly power and bloody militarism; cauldrons of boiling idolatries, poisonous leaders, false prophets, and unrepentant kings. Like saline for a people adrift at sea, these brews only intensify their thirst.³

That's a pretty vivid picture! Somebody had a thesaurus handy when they wrote that paragraph!

In our time, it's not necessarily tribal deities or graven images or militaristic alliances or false prophets that draw us away from God.

The thing that very often takes the place of God, explicitly or more often implicitly, is ourselves.

To be human is to worship something. We will inevitably bow down somewhere, even if at the altar of ourselves.

³ Thomas R. Steagald, "Theological Perspective on Jeremiah 2:4-13" in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 6.

The love of self at the expense of God is the original sin. It goes all the way back to Genesis 3 when the serpent in the garden whispered in the first human ears, "It's ok, take, eat. You will be like God."

It is the sin that destroys us and which is completely counter to the humility that Christ asks of us.

Most of us laugh along to the passage about humble bragging that I began my sermon with, but we laugh because we see the truth in it.

We see it in a cultural and specifically a technological context that trains us every day to treat everything as an extension of ourselves.

From the pictures we take of ourselves to our politics to our values to our experiences to our connection to the right causes, to the company we keep... *everything* becomes part of the brand that we are constantly building up and projecting for the approval of others.

We can even turn humility into part of our brand. It is, after all, the new pride.

And all the while, we become cracked cisterns that can't hold water. The selves we were created to be leak out.

We become unhealthy, mentally, relationally, physically, and spiritually. We see evidence of this all around us.

We see skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression and addiction, we see an unhealthy obsession with identity markers, we see rampant entitlement and abuse of power.

None of these are new things, and each one of them has a whole host of contributing factors, but I think they all point to a very ancient truth.

Selves make very poor gods. They always have.

Jesus and Jeremiah both hold out good news for us, if we will hear it.

The good news is that we don't need to scramble for status and securing the approval of others. We don't need to become little gods.

Instead, we are free to live humbly before God and neighbour. Free to take the lower place. Free to invite the outcast to the table. Free to accept the living water as a gift instead of digging out cracked cisterns for ourselves.

In adopting this posture, in embracing our true status as "not God," we align ourselves with the kingdom that has come and will come in fullness. And we become what we were made to be.

May God help us to come to the fount of Living Water. And may we become vessels through which this water flows out into the world to those who need it most.

Amen.

