

LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES
A Sermon by The Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 28, 2022

Please Read:
Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

I have been conducting premarital counseling sessions with a couple, so when I spotted an article in the paper on check-in questions for couples to help them talk about their relationship, I stopped to read it. There were some good, practical questions such as, “What do we like to do together for fun?” and “Who takes out the garbage now?” and some deeper, more probing questions like, “What is something worrying you that you haven’t told me about yet?” and “How can I make you feel more loved?” But there was one question that caught me up short—“Are we still on the same page about monogamy?” Now, granted I was looking at this with the assumption of a marital relationship, a relationship in which the partners have taken vows to “forsake all others”ⁱ and to adopt “a way of life marked by...fidelity.”ⁱⁱ The article did not make that same assumption. It was written for any couple, who might have found their relationship changed, even damaged, by the pandemic, so the monogamy question might be open for discussion. But a marriage? I am of an age that I remember when “open marriage” became a hip thing. I also remember a couple that I knew back then, who decided that opening their relationship to intimate involvement with others would be acceptable. It wasn’t long before their marriage ended in divorce. The relationship apparently couldn’t bear the weight of divided loyalties.

Neither could the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel. In the poetry of the prophet Jeremiah, God speaks strong words of disappointment, anger and accusation to the people, words that reach back to the beginning of their covenant relationship to recall the early days of love and intimacy, words designed to awaken people suffering from amnesia. God recalls when the relationship with Israel was like that of the newly married, filled with wonder and joy, when the two could not imagine life without the other, when the vow to be loving and faithful was easily made. God recalls, but Israel has forgotten. Israel has become numb, casual and falsely assured. They have forgotten how to return God’s love and have chased after more interesting and exciting gods, like a spouse playing fast and loose with other lovers, while assuming that God would always be there.

Perhaps we need to pause here to consider why we should spend our time with this ancient prophet from a faraway land. Jeremiah lived in the land we now call Holy during a time of decisive struggle among Near Eastern civilizations. Politically, everything was up in the air, but his people did not notice or chose to not notice. They could not believe that their land was in danger because their casual, show-up-on-the-Sabbath faith had become a narcotic. Their faith had devolved into a rote practice that did not inform their lives or their society. Elsewhere Jeremiah says, “Their houses are full of treachery; therefore, they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.”ⁱⁱⁱ OT professor, Walter Brueggemann, describes Jeremiah’s world as coming unglued through “...internal neglect and abdication, by moral cynicism among the powerful, and by external threat.”^{iv} For people of faith of any generation, who want to survive faithfully and humanely, Jeremiah’s words are worth considering. But especially so, in a context like ours, with its frayed social fabric and political divisions.

In today's text, we find ourselves in a courtroom where God presents complaint against the people who had entered into covenant relationship with God. First, they had stopped asking of their past, "Where was Yahweh?" They had forgotten the stories of exodus from Egypt, of the time in the wilderness with God's leading, of the gift of the Promised Land. And they had stopped asking, "Where is Yahweh?" in the present. The civic and religious leaders had forgotten God, so any commitment to justice was abandoned. With no story to remember, no promise to cling to, no word of God to listen for, leaders and people alike looked for something else to worship and love.

In Jeremiah's day it was Baal, a fertility god that promised success, a good harvest, and comfort for the few at the expense of the many. In our day, that something to worship has other names, but with similar easy answers. It can be a struggle to stay faithful, to remember to be thankful, to be attentive for God's activity in the world, to put our full and ultimate trust in One who may at times may seem distant or silent or powerless. It is all too easy to forget, to be distracted by comfort, boredom, anxiety or ambition. God's love is graciously given but exacting, for it asks for our full and undivided love in return. Other gods are tempting because they are less demanding and the payoff more obvious.

One of the gods in our society is the god of being white. Michael Emerson is a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois who has spent the last 30 years researching race and religion. In his most recent work, he proposes that most church-attending white Christians are not bad Christians; they are not Christians at all. He posits that an entire religion has developed around the worship of white dominance, centrality, privilege and assumed universality of being white. Here are some of his findings that undergird his statements. White practicing Christians are twice as likely as other whites to say "being white" is important to them and twice as likely as other whites to say they feel the need to defend their race. When given Bible verses that speak of empowering minority ethnic groups and welcoming foreigners, only one-third of white church-goers reported that the Bible should be used to determine right and wrong. Two-thirds of practicing white Christians placed being white ahead of being Christian, no matter political affiliation, location, age, education, income, or gender.^v

There are plenty of other idols that our society offers us, such as success, wealth, comfort, guns, military might, political power—you can add to the list. This particular idol, however, gives me pause because I am Christian and white and yet am engaged in efforts dedicated to inclusion, diversity and equity. Maybe I am blind to my own idolatry. Maybe each of us is numb to our particular failure to remember God in our unglued world. The tricky thing about idolatry is that it may not seem like we are worshipping a false god. It can seem like we are pursuing good ends or something necessary for our survival, something that surely is good, even if it really is draining us of life and soul.

Jeremiah reminds us to keep asking, "Where is God?" Where is God in the story of our past? In searching our pasts, both our individual life stories and the stories of the church, it causes us to remember those times when God was present and gave what was needed. We tell the stories of the past to remind ourselves of who God has revealed Godself to be. The Hebrew people told the Exodus story to remind themselves of the God of liberation and provision, and of how they were formed as God's people. We tell the story of the crucifixion to remind ourselves that God's love knows no bounds and the story of the resurrection to remind ourselves that God's powerful love defeats even

death. We tell the story of our founding pastor, Guthrie Speers, leading a group of people from this congregation to Selma to march for civil rights to remind ourselves that as God's people we have stood for justice. And we tell our own stories to remind ourselves of those times when faith was strong and God was at work.

But Jeremiah reminds us that we also have to ask the question, "Where is God?" in the present. Where do we see God at work even when the world seems to be coming apart? We ask, not only to remember, but to be alert, to look for those places where God's people need to be at work, to watch for neighbors who need care or suffer from injustice, and to assess the choices that are before us. We ask to help us focus on God because the other gods that would lure us are illusory, not really gods at all. They are without the ability to care for or about us, or the situations in which we find ourselves. They cannot offer us the one thing we need most, a loving, life-giving relationship. Jeremiah tells us they are just cracked, leaky, stagnant cisterns, while God offers us the fresh, flowing water of life.

The good news in all of this is that God cares even when we turn away from and neglect relationship with God. God yearns for us to return. God cares enough about the relationship to rebuke us but also to offer the possibility of forgiveness. God's compassion outweighs God's anger. God loves us with a deep and abiding love and longs for our love in return, so even here, where God's frustration is spilled out over Israel's faithlessness, at the end, comes the reminder that God alone is the source of living water.

Where is God? God is here offering us living water to wash over us like a blessing, refreshing, cleansing, giving new life. May God help us turn from easy idols and return to the One who loves us with a mighty love.

ⁱ *Book of Common Worship*, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), p. 694.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.691.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah 5:27-28.

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 72.

^v Michael O. Emerson, "What Happens When White Identity Comes Before Christian Faith?" <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2022/what-happens-when-white-identity-comes-christian-faith>.