

Proper 17C; August 29, 2010 – Jeremiah 2:4-13, Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

When I went to visit Myanmar in January 2005, I was struck by the vibrancy of faith shown by the Christian community there, and how active the church was. Even though only 2% of the population is Christian in that mostly Buddhist country, it seemed that any day of the week you could find some sort of a gathering – a church dinner, a prayer group, the Mother’s Union, a service – somewhere, somebody always seemed to be actively praising God in community. Personal faith, as well, appeared to be supercharged.

The longer I was in Myanmar, the more pronounced the differences to American society became, and, in particular, the differences to American Christian life as I have experienced it. If you’ve had a really lousy day and feel the need to come to church, the doors are likely to be closed. Come back on Wednesday morning or Saturday from 5-6, or Sunday morning. Oh, and there’s going to be a really fun program one evening next month that you might enjoy Unlike the Burmese people, our church lives, and sometimes our faith lives also as a result, are relegated to a small portion of our week. Some American megachurches have things going on almost every day, but there aren’t any megachurches in Myanmar, and that doesn’t seem to slow them down!

What do you think accounts for this phenomenon? Well, there are several possibilities, but I’d like to look at one in particular. This is what I noticed: the military dictatorship in Myanmar is extremely dangerous and oppressive. The infrastructure is fragile, the people are exceedingly poor, and corruption is rampant. And yet this Christian community seems to get by really well. They are quick to help one another

and to pool resources, and they seem to trust in God as a matter of necessity. It appears that under conditions of adversity, especially longer-term adversity, it's easier to trust God day by day, and to appreciate the goodness that God provides.

I had a similar experience after living through four years of addiction. While a church service or gathering every night is unfathomable here, you can find a 12-step meeting every single day and night. There are hundreds of 12-step meetings in the Baltimore area every single week. Why? Because people in recovery from addictions are uncomfortably familiar with adversity, and are highly motivated to gather regularly so that they can encourage one another, share principles and practices of recovery, remember their experiences, and acknowledge what their Higher Power has done for them. For me, a meeting every day kept me close to God, because I clearly needed to ask for God's help and guidance almost constantly in order to recover and have a fruitful, useful life.

But when gets too comfortable, it's easy to put God's help and guidance on the back burner.

The prophet Jeremiah and the psalmist today named the very same tendency. The people of Israel were the most intimate with God during the harrowing period of their escape from Egypt and their wandering in the wilderness. We read that they followed a pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day; when they ran out of food, God gave them manna; whenever they were terrified and thought all was lost, God saved them and liberated them. They relied on God's help and guidance the entire time.

But then they got secure, “fat and happy,” as we like to say, and they forgot their God. They began to follow the false god Baal by creating idols of him and worshipping those idols.

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this,” we read in Jeremiah, “be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, 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 fountain of living water or cracked cisterns – God or the idols of Baal. And so, the Psalmist tells us, **“God gave the people over to the stubbornness of their hearts, to follow their own devices.”**

There’s no coercion with God, either for us or for the Israelites. The people of Israel were always allowed to do what they wanted, even if there were negative consequences. And life had gotten too good: God brought them out of Egypt into a plentiful land full of good things, and they promptly forgot the giver of these gifts. God doesn’t operate by coercion, but by offering to fill our lives with good things; it’s up to us simply to acknowledge and accept that goodness.

Nine years ago our churches were filled with people after the events of September 11. Our society hadn’t visibly been seeking God, but when we faced disaster and uncertainty and loss, we knew how much we needed God. Yesterday I was talking to a man who has been struggling spiritually – he was raised Catholic, but right now he said he can intellectual find flaws in every religion. He feels lost, and wants to know God. But yesterday, returning from a trip to Costa Rica, the turbulence was the worst he’d ever experienced, and he was terrified; he said somewhat sheepishly that without

even a moment's though, he began to beg Jesus to help! Last week, Jesus was the furthest thing from his mind.

Today, of course, is the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and if the churches hadn't been demolished, people would have flocked to them. I remember a photo of a procession going right down the middle of a completely annihilated area – the cross-bearer and the priest in robes and the church members following along right through the wreckage.

Well, these terrible things happen, but then, once the disaster is behind us, our priorities get all skewed again, a little or a lot.

The challenge for all of us is how easy our lives are. We live lives of incredible ease, and if you doubt that for one second, just think Pakistan – Haiti – Hurricane Katrina. And we don't worship Baals, but we have plenty of other things to worship, and worship them we do. The lay theologian William Stringfellow wrote a book called *Imposters of God* in the late sixties; its subtitle is "Inquiries into favorite idols." Stringfellow's contribution to theology was that he identified and named the idolatry of our own time. Often when people hear the word "idolatry" they most likely think of Baal worship, or the worship of Greek and Roman Gods. But Stringfellow named and spoke about *our* culture's idols, those things that he said "compete for the very lives of men," and I invite you to consider this list in your own context. Do any of these things compete for your very lives? Some of the idols he named were religion, work, money, status, race, patriotism, the Church, education, families, science, middle-class values, and respectability. You might ask what makes these into idols – it's a fair question – and Stringfellow obligingly defined idolatry:

An idol is a person or thing or abstract notion enshrined as God. Idolatry is the worship of what man has turned into such an imposter. In other words, idolatry means honoring the idol as [something that makes a person's] existence . . . morally significant, ultimately worthwhile.

Just think for a second about what makes your own life significant and worthwhile. He then goes on to say:

The idolater believes that his virtue or worthiness depends upon the . . . devotion, service, and elevation he accords to the idol. Thus Americans who have devoutly served the idols of respectability and status all their lives feel threatened in their very being when their children refuse to offer these idols the same worship. (pp. 23-24)

Remember that he was writing in the sixties, when values had gotten all topsy-turvy, and respectability was challenged as never before. He said that in the West we are as enslaved as ever, and perhaps even more so, than people we consider less civilized. Every idol is “an acolyte of death,” he said. Or, as Jeremiah put it, a cracked cistern when we could have the fountain of living water. None of the idols he mentioned are bad in and of themselves – our families, our jobs, our church, respectability – but they become idols when we believe our worthiness depends on them instead of God. For me, the struggle is fairly constant – starting with my husband and my children, certainly including the church, my identity as a priest, my material comforts, my education – many things constantly vie for my allegiance, and it's easy to believe that my worthiness depends on them, so I have to turn to God over and over again.

Stringfellow's solution: Submit yourself single-heartedly to the power of life. That power of life is in the living water offered to us through Jesus Christ. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offered us the perfect model of one who lived what he taught – he really walked his talk unlike anyone before or after! He modeled true humility and single-mindedness. When he said “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and

those who humble themselves will be exalted,” we can’t help but think of the profound humility that led Jesus willingly to the cross. The fountain of living water was always there, but in Jesus Christ that water of life was handed out freely to us, a desperately thirsty people who could drink deeply for the first time.

Stringfellow’s solution, to submit single-heartedly to that fountain of living water, is correct, but I believe it’s much harder for us than for people like the Burmese, because our need for God is less obvious and idols are everywhere we turn. And so that submission must occur over and over again, every single day, as we choose between God and the idols of our lives, as we seek to emulate the words and deeds of service and love that Jesus showed us, and as we ask ourselves and God, over and over again with all the urgency we can summon, for gratitude, gladness and singleness of heart.