

Proper 17C-25 Sermon
August 31, 2025
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

“What happened?!” says God, through the prophet Jeremiah. “What happened!? How did my people get so far from me? Why did they give up on me so quickly and make idols of things that don’t satisfy or give life? Why didn’t they cry out to me saying, ‘Where is the Lord? The Lord who brought us from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of drought and deep darkness?’”

Jeremiah is bemoaning that the people and its leaders did not cry out to the living God, forsaking the fountain of living water for cracked cisterns. Cisterns were how the ancient Israelites stored water in their arid climate. They were pits dug into the ground lined with plaster that collected rain water. But if a cistern was cracked, it would leak and wouldn’t be able to store water. In Jeremiah’s lament, God’s people have chosen cracked cisterns for their sustenance, instead of the God of living water. And God is upset that the people aren’t crying out to God before giving up and going elsewhere. Because crying out to God is an act of faith; trusting that God hears the cry of God’s people.

There is much to cry out about these days. According to Jeremiah, God *wants* us to cry out, to express our grief and our rage, our fear and our hope. In that place of despair and fear, Jeremiah encourages us to cry out, “Where are you, God?”

This morning, God’s answer comes to us in a gospel story. Into our lament, into our cry, a table is being set. It always is. As that famous Psalm says, “You set a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” A table is being set in today’s gospel, in the presence of our lament and our pain.

And Jesus is pulling up a chair.

We find ourselves around a table at a dinner party in the home of an elite religious leader. Those gathered around the table are from the privileged section of society, and they are watching Jesus closely. Perhaps it is a set-up. Today’s reading skips a few verses that tell us there is someone at the table who doesn’t belong - a man who has a physical ailment - edema - a serious swelling condition from accumulated fluid in the body. This likely makes him a social outcast. It is the Sabbath and they are watching Jesus because he isn’t supposed to heal on the Sabbath even though he has done so several times already. But he heals the man anyway.

Even as Jesus is being watched, he is also watching the others and seeing their strategies on where to sit and how to receive the most honor. Social status around tables was of utmost

importance in 1st century Greco-Roman and Jewish society. Where you sat at the home of an important person played a huge role in your life and could make or break an opportunity to increase your social standing. It was an honor/shame society and it was all about keeping track. If you invited someone to dinner, then they were in your debt and had to reciprocate. So when Jesus suggests inviting those who cannot reciprocate, I'm sure it sounded nuts. Also, a dinner party full of social outcasts would be deeply shaming for the host. So Jesus is asking them to overturn deeply established social norms.

Jesus is calling them – calling all of us – to create tables that are equalizing; tables where everyone feels invited; tables that were unheard of in Jesus' day, and we must admit, rare in ours. In Luke's Gospel, the table is the place where Jesus does most of his teaching and even healing. And I'm sure there's a reason for that. Seeing who is sitting around our tables tells us a lot about our priorities and our social standing. Meals take time. There is sharing of food and conversation. Meals ask something of us and are intimate.

The other day I missed a real opportunity for a Jesusy table moment. I was walking down the street to buy myself an iced coffee on a very hot day and I ran into a woman I recognized. Let's call her Jennifer. She comes by Trinity often during the week, looking for some cold water or a bus token. Because of her physical condition, it is hard for her to get around and I'm pretty sure she is unhoused. I said hello and she didn't recognize me, but in her typical cheerful way she asked me what I was up to. I told her I was on my way to buy a cold drink. She asked if I could buy her one, too. I said, yes of course, and together we slowly walked to a nearby coffee shop. The staff, upon seeing us, did everything they could to make her feel welcome. I am hoping they would have treated her the same way had I not been there, but I'm guessing it would have been different. Maybe not. They found a spot for her shopping cart and we stood at the counter looking at the menu. It took her forever to make her decision. I was in a hurry. It had been my plan to just run down there and then get back to the church for my long to-do list. I waited patiently, as did the staff. Finally, she made her choice and sat down at a nice table in the shade. I didn't know she was planning on staying to enjoy her drink. Why shouldn't she? I received my drink and then I said goodbye and hurried off, back to work.

Reflecting back on that, I missed such an opportunity to just sit down with her at the table and enjoy our cold drinks together, commenting on the hot weather, asking about how she was doing. Sharing how I was doing. Sure, I had bought her a cold drink. A good deed. Yet, my expectations to run down there and back, and my assumption that she wouldn't want to stay and sit at a table,

kept me from being able to improvise in the moment and share 20 minutes with her at the table. I'm sure I had read the news that morning, as I usually do. And I'm sure I shook my head and bemoaned the state of affairs. And I'm sure I didn't cry out in prayer, "Where is the Lord?" but instead soothed my growing anxiety by doubling down on my to-do list and gaining a sense of

control by accomplishing tasks. But if I had cried out, “Where are you, God?” after reading the news, I might have been more open to seeing that God was sitting right there at that table with Jennifer.

This is the living water we hear about in Jeremiah and in Luke’s Gospel: Jesus. The one who is sitting at tables with those who have been forgotten, the one who has all the time in the world, the one who *is* a cold drink on a hot day. If we cry out to God, “Where are you?” it means we are looking. It means we need to find God, to see God, to know God. And if we are looking, we will find God – in the background, humming at the edges, in moments that appear when our agendas are flexible and we aren’t in such a hurry. God is there, handing out invitations to moments small and large that can heal our society and heal our hearts one RSVP at a time.

A friend of mine, DJ Johnsen, is good at looking for those divine invitations here in Santa Barbara. He is friends with many people living on the streets and he has followed some of the lucky ones who have gotten what is called permanent supportive housing. The Housing Authority provides a few of these residences here in town where the majority of rent is paid for, and there are staff onsite to help the tenants navigate services that are available to people on very low incomes. DJ discovered, however, that while it is indeed wonderful that these people have a roof over their heads, many of them are lonely and experiencing a profound sense of isolation. So DJ, inspired by one of his young interns, started something he calls “supper clubs,” in which small teams of people make a homemade meal and bring it to one of the permanent supportive housing buildings in town, and invite the residents. They all sit down at a table and eat the meal together, talk about their lives and build relationships over time. The residents have gotten to know their neighbors this way, and community is built. DJ came up with the name “supper club” because it implies elite expensive dinners saved for the upper echelons of society. *These* dinners, however, are more like the meals Jesus is inviting us to in today’s Gospel - a table that equalizes, that gives honor to those usually at the bottom, that blesses everyone who has a seat there. In a blog post DJ wrote, he says, “‘Social isolation’ has such an intimidating ring to it when you consider it on a societal scale. When you consider social isolation around a table, though, it feels a little more manageable. You soon realize it affects all of us; not just the supposed ‘beneficiaries’ of our efforts. We all overcome loneliness, it turns out, one dinner at a time.” Trinity might be participating in one of these supper clubs on a monthly basis. So Stay tuned.

The world’s a bit of a mess right now. Let’s listen to the prophet Jeremiah and be a people who look for the fountain of living water for our sense of being okay. And when we can’t find it, let’s cry out for it. Because God hears our cries and God shows up. There are plenty of cracked cisterns available to make us feel safe and in control: addictions that offer false companionship, in-crowds that help us feel like we belong, distractions everywhere that help us escape, and my personal favorite – the illusion of the scarcity of time, and the sense of busyness and hurry that accompanies it. But into this swirl, a table is being set. It always is. If we slow down it will

appear, right under our noses: daily opportunities to break out of our busy routines and to sit at tables with Jesus, who is the living water. Jesus – present in those at the bottom and on the outside, present in the elderly neighbor or junior high student in the school cafeteria, present in our hospital roommate or our eccentric relative – present in that elusive yet ever-available kingdom of God reality that appears when we look for it; when we make space for it.

A table is being set right here, right now. A table that serves as the template, a practice, for our tables out there in the world. We come forward with open hands, in all our shapes and sizes, in all our pain and joy, to the table where Jesus is the host, ready with his blessing.