

Sunday, September 1, 2013: Jeremiah 2:4-13

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

Larry was my spiritual director for seven years, but when I moved from Durham, North Carolina, to Pittsburgh, I could no longer make the monthly drive. On my last visit, instead of lighting a candle and inviting me to sit with him in a time of silence, he suggested we take a walk. As the river water rippled over the smooth rocks alongside our path, we let our conversation ripple over the last seven years.

We agreed that one of the ongoing lessons I'd been learning was that I could be more available to God by not holding on to people, things and ideas. I had been grieving because I was saying goodbye to a city, people and the church that had been my home for many years. We both laughed when I said, "It's not getting much easier."

This releasing is hardest for me when the thing that God is inviting me to release has gained an identity, so much so that it's beginning to function for me as a god. I'm amazed at how easily jobs, people, things and even ideas weasel their way into taking a God's-job role in our lives.

My recent move means that I won't be preaching every week anymore. Letting go of the pulpit is hard because I can't imagine who I will be without the preacher's task to do, a congregation to listen to me and the satisfaction I get from the weekly attention. I suspect that most spiritual directors are not as blunt as Jeremiah, who would call this idolatry. "You are worshiping worthless things, and so are becoming worthless yourself." But in this prophetic moment of truth telling Jeremiah was doing what good spiritual directors and soul friends do: they help us to see those things we are holding onto in our lives, grasping at them because we believe they will give us identity, security and worth.

An important theological insight here is the fully Jewish and Christian insight that runs from Genesis through the Psalms, Paul's letters and Augustine's writing and finds its fullest articulation in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. As Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe puts it, "Sin does not consist in wanting bad things: there *are* no bad things; all things are created by God. Sin consists in how you want

*small* things.” The same can be said of idolatry. Idolatry is not holding on to the wrong things; it’s holding on to good things wrongly, including God. When this kind of holding happens these things become worthless, so to speak—not worthless in themselves, but worthless with regard to the godly role we’ve given them. This holding on amounts to digging cisterns for ourselves—cisterns which, as Jeremiah would remind us, are cracked.

God cannot be possessed by grasping. An image from Denise Levertov’s poem “Suspended” helps to show why: “I had grasped God’s garment in the void / but my hand slipped / on the rich silk of it.” *The rich silk of it*. God’s glory cannot be grasped because of its overabundance; by God’s very nature God cannot be possessed.

So we have two alternatives: try to possess other things as if they were God—the temptation to idolatry—or receive God as gift. It’s a stark choice: receive God as a fountain of living water—or dig our own cracked, leaking cisterns.

It’s difficult to tell the difference between the two; that’s why we need soul friends, whether gentle and welcoming like most spiritual directors, or direct and prophetic like Jeremiah. We need soul friends who can walk beside us shoulder to shoulder, meandering with us through life the way friends meander through a park. We need soul friends whose conversations with us have the potential to become mirrors to our souls, showing to us over the months and years when we are beginning to possess one of the genuine goods of life wrongly, or when we are beginning to possess God wrongly by trying to possess God at all. We need friends who can help us discover the grace to loosen our grip so that we might learn to receive.

Jeremiah says that God is a fountain of living water. On my last visit with my spiritual director, he used a different water image. He gave me a shell he had picked up at the beach a year ago. The last words he wanted to leave me with were the words I learned as a child singing about how the living water of God’s love is “deep and wide.” God’s presence in our lives is like the ocean, he said, surrounding us and hemming us in on every side. As Charles Wesley wrote, “We are plunged in the Godhead’s deepest sea, / And lost in Thine immensity.”

And who can possess the ocean?