

The Potter's House
Jeremiah 18:1-11
First Presbyterian Church
June 13, 2021

Bible Reading

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

The Potter and the Clay

18 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." 3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. 11 Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Sermon

We've all heard the opening line to William Cowper's hymn: "God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform..."¹ And indeed, this is true. As people of the Book, we encounter God working in all kinds of mysterious ways to accomplish God's purposes.

¹ William Cowper, 1773, Hymn 30 in Glory to God.

This morning we encounter one of those ways - as the crusty and sometimes ill-tempered prophet, Jeremiah, steps into a potter's house to watch him practice his craft. The potter is at work at his wheel... the vessel is spoiled in the potter's hands... so he collapses it and reworks it into the vessel he intends it to be.

For Jeremiah, the pot that needed to be collapsed and remolded was none other than the people of Israel – for whom pride, and self-centeredness and rejection of God's will had become a way of life. They had convinced themselves that no matter how far they strayed, God would never... EVER... allow Jerusalem and the temple to fall into foreign hands. They were wrong! "Can I not do to you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" says the Lord. "Like clay in his hands, so are you in my hand."

Though I'm not sure I really LIKE the idea of being a lump of mud... nor do I like the idea of God the potter remaking me into something other than I am (sounds painful!) ... I do understand how some folks find this hard text to ALSO be one of the most encouraging and hopeful stories in all the Bible. Again, and again, I go back to something Yale Divinity School Professor Margaret Farley once wrote about the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: "Whatever else the Christian faith has stood for across the centuries, it has always maintained that what has been, does not necessarily determine what will be." In other words, if God can roll away the stone that sealed the tomb in which Jesus' body lay, then surely God can roll away the stones that would keep you from becoming the beautiful, faithful, alive person God always intended for you to be.

In a few short minutes, we will sing Adelaide Pollard's much-loved hymn, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord!" We will sing, "You are the potter, I am the clay... mold me and make me, after thy will..." and we will imagine ourselves as clay in God's hands being shaped and reshaped according to God's purposes. God is the potter who works at the wheel... and each of us is a vessel in God's hands. Yet, we need to realize that Jeremiah is not only imagines God reshaping our individual lives, but also our lives together as a church... as a community of faith.² You see, the message from the potter's house was addressed to the NATION of Israel... God's people as a whole. And while not ignoring what this image says to us as individuals, this is the connection I want to try to make this morning – God as the potter and we, as a congregation, the clay – being shaped and reshaped during this next year as we enter this time of discernment as a church.

I hope most all of you are aware by now that we have begun a succession plan in anticipation of my retirement about a year from now. This process really began last December when our Personnel Committee started thinking about how this time of transition could be as healthy and productive as possible.

² Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, (WJK,2021) p.27

Since then, the session has formed a task force which has already been VERY hard at work – meeting with our presbytery’s Committee on Ministry... engaging a consultant to help guide the process... even hooking up with an outfit named, of all things, “Holy Cow!” to do an in-depth survey of the members of our church. YOU are an essential part of the process as you fill out the survey and later in the summer, as you gather in small groups to talk together about who we are and what God is calling us yet to be and do in the years to come. You see, one way to look at this next year is retiring one pastor and calling another... in other words, that it’s an HR matter... that it’s about the pastors. Another way to see this next year is to recognize that our congregation is a clay vessel always being worked and reworked in the hands of a very loving, yet very purposeful God. I have been at this long enough to know – it’s NOT about the pastors... it’s about God’s purposes. And if we can make it about God’s purposes, then I think Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house may offer us some guidance and encouragement for the months and years ahead. Three things for today... first, a word of encouragement.³ I am not a potter, but I do like to work with my hands... which leads me to know that no potter works aimlessly... without purpose... just for the heck of it. Every turn of the wheel matters... even the slightest bit of pressure on the clay has a purpose. So, it is with God... God has purpose for us. And NOW is an opportune time to get reacquainted with our purpose - to allow God to use our imaginations and give us vision for the future.

You may remember when Jesus was preparing his disciples for HIS eventual departure – and NO, I am NOT comparing myself to Jesus... just illustrating the point – when the Lord was preparing his disciples for their future as his church, he said, “I tell you the truth, those who have faith in me will do what I have been doing. And they will do even greater things than these...”⁴ God means to shape and reshape this congregation for purposes that far exceed our vision or imagination. But as poet, Carl Sandburg, once said: “Nothing happens unless first a dream.” Now is an opportune time to dream.

Second, a challenge. Again, I’m not a potter, but I do know that not all clay is the same... so that the potter must adapt to the conditions of whatever clay is in her hand. So, it is with God’s working and reworking of our congregational life. God works with who we are uniquely –

with our strengths and weaknesses...

with our successes and failures...

with our history and ways of doing things...

with our quirks and idiosyncrasies.

And our challenge, friends, during this “opportune time,” is to again choose (as a congregation) to be flexible, moldable, pliable... willing to be shaped according to the way of Christ.

³ These three applications are inspired by Sally Brown’s essay.

⁴ John 14:12

Third and finally, there is a call to move ahead... because there will come a time when decisions are made, and the shape of the future will be set. Just as there is a point when a pot is raised from the wheel and its future is set... for communities of faith there are “watershed moments” when decisions that are made have a profound and lasting impact on their future. Looking back, there have been many of these turning points in the almost 150-year history of this congregation – the decision to move from the little frame church downtown near the railroad tracks to this site... then, the decision to remain here and be a downtown church with all the blessings and challenges that brings. Over the years, this congregation has made at least five decisions to build and expand – each one significantly influencing the congregation’s future. There was the decision fifty-five years ago to elect the first female elder... and thirty years ago, to call our first female pastor. More than 20 years ago, the decision was made to support the creation of Exodus Homes when many in Hickory opposed this ministry to persons being released from drug treatment and incarceration. FPC was also the first congregation in Hickory to support ALFA (Aids Leadership Foothills Alliance). And more recently, we made the decision to create a new worship service which has had a profound impact on our church. And now... as a church that honors the past but realizes that much has changed (and that the pandemic has only accelerated the changes that were already happening) ... we are again seeking ways to be God’s faithful vessel in this community for years to come. I don’t want to be overly dramatic here, but I do believe that THIS is a very significant time (an “opportune time”) for this particular lump of God’s clay we call First Presbyterian Church.

Well, just to complete the metaphor (hopefully, without overdoing it) ... we hear clearly in this text the hopeful message that God has not shaped any of us once for all. One thing potter’s notice when reading this text is that the clay, the pot, the vessel has not been sent to the kiln, but remains UNFIRED. Clay that has been fired dries... shrinks... and hardens. It may be pretty and functional, but it is rigid and brittle and easily broken. Clay that has not been fired keeps its plasticity – it can be shaped and reshaped infinitely... it is moldable, flexible, responsive... which makes it a material of POSSIBILITY. Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils, God didn’t fire the clay from which God made any of us... and neither has God fired the clay from which this church is sculpted. If we are willing, God is able to shape us and reshape us and promises to labor tirelessly at the wheel on our behalf. Whether it is me and you as individual disciples... or this congregation as a body... God assesses our character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and, when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.⁵

Frankly, I love the thought of this church – which from the outside is so very beautiful –

⁵ Anatheia Portier-Young in her commentary on Jeremiah 18:1-11 from Workingpreacher.org.

but with its large stones and heavy timbers could easily be seen as being rigid, immovable, unchangeable... I love the idea of this place and these people as clay... being worked and reworked in the hands of a very loving and very purposeful potter.

I ALSO love the story that came from a church in another city. A new Sunday school class began in the fall entitled "Spiritual Formation." And after the class had been going on for several weeks, a woman in the church asked the teacher if it was alright that she join the class. The teacher said, "Of course! Why would you ask?" The woman replied, "Well, I am 94 years old. I just wondered if it were too late for me."⁶ I have wonderful news for all of you today. It is never too late for God to get his hands on you (whatever your age) AND to get his hands on this church (at almost 150 years old) ... to help us all become what God intended us to be all along.

⁶ Heidi Husted, "Matters of the Heart," Christian Century, 16-23 August 2000, p. 828.