

The Potter and the Clay
Jeremiah 18:1-12

I have a potter friend who lives in Russellville. His name is Winston Taylor, and he actually has a connection to this church. **There is a beautiful sculpture that depicts the story of Jesus and the woman at the well that hangs in the narthex right behind the welcome desk in the main building. **Here are a couple of pictures of his work.

Winston is an amazing artist. He makes a lot of pieces for churches including communion cups and plates. In fact, I just saw on his facebook page that he had made some pieces for one of the Presbyterian churches here in Fort Smith. **Here's a short video of Winston putting the finishing touches on a piece of pottery.

--It's mesmerizing to watch how carefully he works on this piece of pottery. How he attends to minute details to make it perfectly beautiful, but also perfectly unique. He knows from years of experience how to apply just the right amount of pressure and not to make a gouge or even destroy the whole thing with a heavy hand. He has to use a light but firm touch -- he has a very precise and careful method, doesn't he?

**Today I brought with me a piece of pottery that Winston made for me. I also have a communion cup and a plate that he made for me during my first year of ministry. And when I graduated from seminary some very sweet friends of mine gave me a Winston Taylor gift certificate so that I could get a pitcher and a bowl for baptism or foot washing. And Winston was going to match the communion set I had. I talked to Winston about the colors and what I liked, I placed the order, and then I waited and waited and waited. Finally, a couple of months later I called to check on it, and he told me he had run into a little problem and it was almost ready. During Holy Week last year, Winston called me to come pick it up, and when I got to his studio he told me the most interesting story about why it had taken so long. You see Winston had created the pitcher exactly the way he wanted it, and in the firing process which hardens the clay the handle broke. But he didn't give up on the pitcher. He didn't throw it away. Instead, he took the pitcher and set it in a pan with water in the bottom. And the clay pitcher slowly dissolved into nothing. Then, he drained the water off and gathered up the materials from the dissolved pitcher and remade the pitcher using the very same materials that the broken pitcher had been made of. He reshaped it; he re-molded it; he remade it. The previously broken pitcher had been recreated into something useful and totally beautiful. He saved it from the trash can and turned it into a new creation; he redeemed it!

**In today's scripture, we have this beautiful image of the potter and the clay. But there are also some really difficult words in this passage. Jeremiah uses the image of the potter and the clay to give God's people a stark message and a warning to change. We hear words of doom and gloom -- we hear words of judgment from God against the people and the nation of Israel, but we also hear words of hope and promise..... We hear the word "if"if the people turn from their evil ways and reform their ways and actions things will work out for them. (18:10). Now, I think it is really important to know where Jeremiah is coming from to get the whole picture. Jeremiah has been called the weeping prophet. My study Bible describes the book of Jeremiah as the prophetic book that is "most deeply anchored in suffering." (CEB Study Bible, 1206 OT). And there is a reason for that. The book was written as a response to three military invasions by the Babylonians that happened in 597, 587 and 582 BC. These invasions resulted in the temple in Jerusalem being destroyed. Thousands died and were taken away into exile in

Babylon. The Israelites' land and property was confiscated by the invaders. Their entire way of life was wiped out. It **was** a time of weeping for God's people. And Jeremiah's words throughout the book speak to the pain and trauma that the people were enduring. The book of Jeremiah was described by one writer as "disaster literature." And this certainly seemed to be a disaster for God's people and actually maybe it seemed to be a disaster for God, too. You see throughout the Old Testament, we read about promises that God had made to God's people. God had promised Abraham that he would make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And that he would be the father of many nations. God promised the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. God had named them God's chosen and holy people. And now --- now this disaster had struck. The holy city of Jerusalem and the very dwelling place of God had been obliterated. God's people had been killed and the land God provided had been stripped from them. They were living among pagans in Babylon! This was a disaster. It must have felt like God was punishing them or at the very least that God had deserted them or wasn't all-powerful at all.

But I'm afraid that God's people had come to believe that being the chosen people gave them a privileged relationship with Yahweh that assured they would be prosperous and succeed in all they did. But as Jeremiah points out, these promises God made the people were a two way street -- they were a covenant. Meaning that as God's chosen people, they had a responsibility to obey God! They also had a responsibility to honor God and to worship only the one true God. The nation had a responsibility to care for the orphans and widows and immigrants among them.

And because of their disobedience, Yahweh had a message of tough love for the people. And that message is delivered using the image of the potter and the clay. Now you may already have this figured out. The potter is God, and the clay is the people --that is the people of Israel individually and the nation of Israel as a whole, and maybe you have even made the leap of applying this scripture to your life and you can see yourself as the clay. And the word from the Lord is this:

6 House of Israel, can't I deal with you like this potter, declares the Lord? Like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel! 7 At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; 8 but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. (18:6-8)

The prophet Isaiah uses the same metaphor of the potter and clay. Isaiah 29:16 says:

16 You have everything backward!
Should the potter be thought of as clay?
Should what is made say of its maker,
"He didn't make me"?
Should what is shaped say of the one who shaped it,
"He doesn't understand"?

Isaiah 45:9 says:

9 Doom to the one who argues with the potter,
as if he were just another clay pot!
Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?"

or “Your work has no handles”?

You see, Israel had gotten confused about who the potter was and who the clay was. Of course the clay is not going to talk back to the potter. The clay’s purpose is determined 100% by the potter. In fact, the clay can **only** have purpose **because** the potter has shaped it into something useful and something beautiful and something uniquely created for a very specific purpose.

I listened to an interview with a potter this week. And it was really fascinating. She talked about how she learned something new from each pot that she made, and she said that when she was at the potter’s wheel her entire focus was on that one piece of pottery --- she was fully focused. And if someone wanted to talk to her while she was working, she had to stop her work because she insisted on focusing only on that creation. She said that sometimes in making a piece there is a weak spot that has to be built up or there is a lump that has to be smoothed out. The potter talked about the way that sometimes a pot just goes really wrong and it gets uncentered, she said sometimes pots are wonky -- and it might get so off balance that you just have to scrap the whole project. But she also said that you never throw away the clay. You always remake, repurpose and redeem the clay for another use.

The potter talked about the texture of the clay. She said that the clay has to be soft enough to work with. Sometimes the clay is just too hard and it can’t be molded into whatever it’s intended to be -- and water has to be added. Sometimes, she said the clay just gets exhausted -- it gets worn out and can’t be worked any more, and it just has to be put aside to rest for a while. But then at a later point, the potter can pick it up and successfully work it into a new creation.

*The potter talked about the process of using her hands to carefully open up the piece of clay into a form that could be useful as a vessel -- just opening it up for usefulness. She talked about how messy the process is. And she talked about the fact that none of her pieces were perfect and that in fact she really didn’t strive for perfection. Instead, she strived that each one would be unique and creative and whimsical.

What a beautiful metaphor for a life lived with Christ!

We are flawed and broken people who live in a flawed and broken world. Sometimes, like the Israelites we find ourselves living in the midst of a disaster. Sometimes, life feels hopeless. Sometimes we become so hardened by our life’s experiences that we become closed off to the work of God’s hand in our lives. Sometimes we feel unbalanced, off center, exhausted and even thrown aside. Sometimes we reach the point that the messiness of life has just disgusted us so much that we can’t even deal with it.

But you know what, I hope you are hearing a message of hope and love and grace, today. I hope you are hearing that we are all in the process of becoming vessels used by God. I hope you hear that we are never cast aside, but that God is constantly in the process of shaping us into exactly the person he envisions we can be. I hope you are hearing this message of redemption -- of being saved.

You see, the book of Jeremiah is not just disaster literature, it is also survival literature. “In a world crushed with pain, [Jeremiah] imagines God sharing new beginnings from the ruins of fallen worlds.” (CEB Study Bible, 1206 OT).

And that is what God does! God takes the ruins of our lives and God takes our messed up world and redeems it all. God takes what is exhausted and off center

and thrown away
and broken apart
and carefully,
firmly,
lovingly,
creatively
molds us into a new creation with a very particular purpose.

But the key point is this: we aren't exactly like the clay. Because we humans have been given glorious freedom. We have the freedom to follow God or to go our own way. We have the freedom to be open and soften our hearts to God or to be hard and closed off. Like the Israelites, we too are invited into this covenant relationship, this two way street with God. So the question is.... will we allow God to mold us and shape us into what we are intended to be? Will we follow Jesus and live into our own particular God-given purpose? Will we recognize that we are the clay and not the potter?

So, my challenge for you this week is this: would you spend some time thinking about how God has molded you and for what purpose. How has God molded you and for what purpose? Now for example a potter can make pasta bowls and communion cups and pitchers for baptisms and wall hangings that depict Bible stories--all very different creations for different uses. And God makes us each for particular purposes too. We are given gifts and skills and totally different personalities. We are gifted with vocations, training and education. We are molded by our experiences, both bad and good. We are molded by the people in our lives and we are molded by the movement of God's Holy Spirit. And then all of the parts of who we are -- those are the things that we can tap into to show God's love to our neighbors. So -- this week would you think about one experience or characteristic or gift that is unique about you, and would you consider how you **are** or how you **might begin** to use that one thing to show the love of God to others. I really want you to think about these two things -- talk with your friends and family about them. What is one thing that is unique about you and how might you use it to show God's love to others?

I want to end today by sharing with you some words of hope and promise from Jeremiah's book found in chapter 29, where the weeping prophet predicts the end of the Israelites' exile in Babylon:

10 The Lord proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. **11** I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. **12** When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. **13** When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. **14** I will be present for you, declares the Lord, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.