

YOU ARE A PIECE OF WORK!

Jeremiah 18:1-11

God is shaping us for a purpose.

A sermon preached by
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I love a good piece of pottery. If I go to a craft fair with all sorts of handmade goods, I am always drawn to the pottery booths. Carey and I have many pieces of pottery at our home. I have brought several of them for show and tell today. Our favorite potter is a lady near Foreman, Arkansas, where Carey went to high school, named Lee Jackson. She and her husband have a business called Buck Run Pottery. So they put a “BR” on the bottom of all their pieces. I feel like that sort of personalizes it for me.

Today we want to look at one of the best-loved images out of the Old Testament and one of the most accessible passages in the book of Jeremiah. It is written in prose, not poetry, and it uses an experience that was common to everyone. The story about the potter’s house is sort of a prophetic parable, an action that was intended to convey a word from the Lord.

In fact, God sent Jeremiah to the potter’s house intentionally to give him a word. Jeremiah went to see the potter, and the potter was working at his wheel. The pot he was throwing became “spoiled” or off-center, and the potter pushed the clay back together, started over, and made a new vessel.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. God could do this with Israel, God’s chosen people. They were like clay in his hands. This reality brought both judgment and hope. If Israel was spoiled in God’s hands, he could pull them up and destroy them. But even if God had to abandon God’s initial plan because of the sin of the people, God would not throw the clay away. God would not abandon Israel. God would re-shape, re-form, and re-mold them into a new vessel, if they would only repent and return to God. This is the word of God to the people: “*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.*”¹

Unfortunately, the people were not in a place to hear the word of God, to turn from their wicked ways, and repent of their sin. They answered, “*It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.*”² It would take the destruction of Jerusalem and 70 years of exile before they would return to the Lord.

What can we learn from this unique word from the Lord today? It is still God’s word for God’s people.

First, our core understanding of our identity is that we are God's creation. We are the clay in the Potter's hand. We are formed by God in the image of God for the glory of God. In the creation story itself, God said, "*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*"³ God took the dust of the earth and formed it into a human being, blew breath into his lifeless form, and the man became a living being. We are created in the image of God.

The Psalmist put this truth into the words of a song: "*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*"⁴ Even when we stray from the way, even when we don't appear very God-like, we cannot erase the inner connection. Our essential nature is the image of God.

If you visit Bangkok, Thailand, one of the sights you will want to see is the Golden Buddha. It is a statue of the Buddha made of pure gold, 10 feet tall, weighing over 5 tons. The estimated value of the gold is \$250 million. It was crafted some 800 years ago, but about 300 years ago, invaders came into Thailand, and to prevent the Buddha from being stolen or destroyed, the monks covered it with stucco and bits of colored glass. The monks were killed by the invaders, and their secret died with them. For 200 years, the stucco Buddha remained in a minor temple in the city. In 1955, the statue was being moved because the temple was in disrepair. There are various stories about what happened next, but somehow the statue was dropped, and the stucco was cracked, and the gold beneath the surface was revealed.⁵ They removed all the stucco so they could see the statue in all its glory and beauty.

Sometimes we let ourselves become like the stucco Buddha. The covering of sin and compromise and so-called maturity hides our golden essence, our true being, our inner value. We are like a lump of clay on the potter's wheel, waiting to be formed into a thing of beauty.

So the second thing we learn from this text is that we can get out of balance and fail to achieve our purpose. As Jeremiah walked up to the potter's house, he saw a vessel get spoiled, and the potter took it down and formed it into a new vessel. And God said, "*Can I not do with you, O house*

*of Israel, just as this potter has done?"*⁶ Historically, this was a word for the nation of Israel, who were turning away from God and inviting destruction. But the word works for us today as well. As a nation, as a church, as families, as individuals, we can get out of balance, out of sync with our God. And a pot that becomes unbalanced is useless to the potter.

James Howell, the pastor at Myers Park UMC in Charlotte, North Carolina, preached on this text a few years ago and actually invited a potter to join him for the sermon. Rene Simmons shared with him that some of the words that potters use have religious connotations.⁷ If there is a problem throwing a pot, they say the clay is "wonky." That's not the religious word. But if the clay gets wonky, the potter "redeems" it. He or she reshapes it, repurposes it into something else. Clay can get "exhausted," in which case it has to be set aside, rested, and reconditioned, like a clay sabbath.

In order for the wheel to work right, the clay has to be "centered," and then the potter "opens up" the clay from the center. Sounds like a process of faith, doesn't it? The clay has to be in the right condition to be used—not too hard or too soft—if it's too hard, a little water can make it right. Like the waters of baptism or the tears of repentance. And you won't find a potter dressed neatly; they are always spattered with mud. Pottery is a messy business, like our spiritual journey toward our Creator, the great Potter.

So when we get wonky, out of balance, exhausted, God can fix us. Like a master Potter, God can redeem, re-shape, re-form, and re-claim the parts of us that are off-center. Our humanity is God's favorite medium.

Nikos Kazantzakis was a Greek writer whose novels often dealt with spiritual themes. In his novel *Christ Recrucified*, there is a scene in which four village men confess their sins to one another in the presence of the Pope. One of the men, Michelis, cries out, "How can God let us live on the earth? Why doesn't he kill us to purify creation?"

The Pope answered, "Because, Michelis, God is a potter; he works in mud."⁸

In fact, when God takes our broken pieces, our spoiled clay, our exhausted mud, and re-creates us in God's image, the result is even more

beautiful than before. We can become stronger in the broken places, and our lives can be redeemed to glorify God.

There is a form of Japanese art called “kintsukuroi.” The word means “golden repair.” It’s the art of repairing or restoring broken pottery with gold. The broken pottery is not thrown away; the gold becomes the seam between the broken pieces and joins the broken pieces back together. So the fractures are not disguised or hidden; they are the focal point of the *kintsukuroi* process.⁹

The philosophy behind this intricate art is that brokenness is beautiful. The true life or essence of an object (or a life) only begins to be revealed when it breaks. The vulnerability of an imperfect piece of pottery increases its appeal. Look some of these up on the internet; they are stunning to look at.

God can take our brokenness and make it beautiful. We can even be stronger because we have endured the trials, suffered the losses, and come through it alive. If you have been broken at some point by the blows of life, that doesn’t mean you are useless to God. It means you are even more useful. Your brokenness can open up wells of compassion for those who are hurting. Your vulnerability can make a connection with other broken people. That’s why the best person to counsel with an addict is someone who is a recovering addict. When my father died, it was the first time my heart had been broken in grief, but it took my ministry with grieving people to a whole new level. When I went through a divorce, it made a connection with divorced people because we had been through similar brokenness. We don’t need to brag on our brokenness, but we don’t need to hide it, either. In terms of our witness to the world, to show where God has put our broken pieces back together, re-formed our wonky clay, is a great statement of faith.

So we have learned from this short passage of Scripture that we are God’s handiwork. We are made in God’s image. If we go off-center and get out of balance, God knows how to redeem the clay. God can fix us. God can put us back on the wheel and re-center us and create something new.

Finally, it is clear from our text that we are being formed for a purpose. There is a point to each piece of pottery. It can be purely decorative, something to delight the eyes and hands that hold it. Or it can be as useful

as a coffee mug or a pie plate. (I especially like pie plates!) Making pottery is too complicated and messy to do it for no reason. Every piece has a purpose.

God sent Jeremiah to the potter's house because God had a purpose for the people of Israel. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, God said, "*I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"¹⁰ Israel was God's chosen people. God had made covenant with them to be their God, and they would be God's people. Yet at the time of Jeremiah, they were not fulfilling their purpose. They were turning away from God, turning toward false idols, and a day of reckoning was coming. It wouldn't have mattered, except they were formed for a divine purpose.

The church was formed with a purpose in mind. We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus, the physical embodiment in the world of the continuing presence of the resurrected Lord. Jesus gave the church its purpose in the Great Commission: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*"¹¹ The church does many things: worship God, teach the faith, feed the hungry, visit the sick; the list goes on. But when all is said and done, the church's purpose is to love every person with the love of Jesus, and through that welcoming, inclusive love, to draw others into the circle, to make disciples who then make disciples. The church was made to make more and better Christians. That's our purpose.

So what about you? If you are a piece of God's pottery, what is your purpose? What's your function? What's your mission? Some people have great missions that span the globe and change history. There are not many of those hearing this sermon this morning. But there are others whose mission is much less grandiose, but who are just as important as a Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Billy Graham. A parent of a special needs child, a spouse who cares for their loved one with Alzheimer's, a Sunday School teacher who shows up every week to teach the children, a musician who practices and perfects his or her music to give glory to God, a disciple of Jesus who gives food to a hungry soul—people like that show the imprint of the hand of the Potter. Their lives are full of the purpose of

God: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. You were made for this!

So we celebrate today this ancient word that is as relevant and personal as your grocery list. We are the clay on God's wheel. God is forming us into something beautiful and useful. When we fail, God reworks us so we can continue to fulfill our purpose. It is an incredible thing to be a part of this process.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the great spiritual leaders of the 20th century. He once said something very profound about the purpose and significance of our lives. Shortly before his death in December of 1972, Carl Stern of NBC interviewed Rabbi Heschel for the TV program *Eternal Light*. His last question was, "What message do you have for young people?"

I have shared Rabbi Heschel's response with our youth before: "I would say: let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can—every one—do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art."¹²

That is the meaning of life. You are a piece of work—God's work, God's art, made for a purpose by your heavenly Father. Let me challenge you today to do two things with that: (1) Celebrate who you are. You are a child of God, created in God's image, fearfully and wonderfully made. And (2) do something this week that fulfills your purpose in creation. The Potter will be so pleased.

¹ Jeremiah 18:11.

² Jeremiah 18:12.

³ Genesis 1:26.

⁴ Psalm 139:13-14.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Buddha_\(statue\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Buddha_(statue)). See also Jack Canfield and Mark Hansen, *Chicken Soup For The Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1993), 69ff.

⁶ Jeremiah 18:6.

⁷ James Howell, "Weekly Preaching, September 8, 2019," *MinistryMatters.com*.

⁸ Rick Ezell, *The 7 Sins of Highly Defective People* (Kregel, 2003), *PreachingToday.com*.

⁹ Georgia Pellegrini, "Out of His Shell," *The Wall Street Journal* (5-27-16); source: Mockingbird blog, "Another Week Ends," (6-24-16).

¹⁰ Isaiah 49:6.

¹¹ Matthew 28:19-20.

¹² *The Eternal Light*, NBC, 1972.