

Lessons from the Potter's House
Rev. Janet Scott
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Jeremiah 18: 1-11
September 4, 2016

Have you ever seen a potter shaping clay on a wheel? It's a beautifully creative process that isn't as easy as it looks. It takes a lot of skill and a lot of practice; and even then there are many re-workings of the clay to create just the image the potter has envisioned in his or her mind.

I have taken pottery classes and can appreciate that it is both an art and a craft to be a skilled potter. One, alas, that I still cannot claim. But I love pottery.

In our text today, Jeremiah sees a potter reworking clay that was spoiled in the potter's hands. There are many things that can spoil clay as it is being shaped on a wheel, from the moistness of it to some impurity within it. Even after the clay has been formed, an impurity can cause the pot to crack or shatter when being fired. Impurities can weaken and shorten the life of the pottery. It takes a truly gifted potter to take spoiled clay and make something long-lasting. Today, we imagine that the hand of God can rework clay that is spoiled, that has flaws, and make it into something beautiful; into a vessel that has purpose and character.

The book of Jeremiah was written for a people who were scattered geographically, politically and theologically. Jeremiah's prophetic words were inviting them back to their original calling as children of God, children of hope, children of promise. This passage is one of judgment but listen also for hopefulness.

Scripture Jeremiah 18: 1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 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. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 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. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 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. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 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. 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.

The first thing I notice about this story is has to do with the ways that God speaks to us. The opening words of the story, and they're repeated again before it is over, are "*the word of the Lord came to me.*" Such words stir up a fair bit of anxiety for many of us who

seek to know and follow the ways of Jesus. We mostly cope okay when it is said by the Biblical prophets like Jeremiah, but when it is said by people we know, many of us shift uneasily in our seats. Most of us have known people who frequently say, “the Lord told me this,” or “the Lord told me that,” and often they seem very reluctant to give any account of how the Lord told them, and how they know it was the Lord. They sound as though it was as clear and unmistakable as a voice on the other end of a telephone, and that leaves most of us feeling either inadequate, or skeptical, or both. For most of us, clear-cut experiences of a voice from God are rare experiences, if we have had them at all. We certainly don’t feel like we get daily voicemails from God.

But this story from Jeremiah makes me wonder whether his experience at the potter’s house was a lot more like something many of us are more familiar with. Last week many of us were at camp and someone wrote a beautiful little reflection on something, seemingly insignificant, that happened in worship there. It was the littlest thing: an act of graciousness during communion, but someone observed this action, and meditated on it and allowed it to speak to her. And when she wrote about it, I’m sure anyone who read it would not only be convinced that God had spoken to her, but that God was speaking to us through her. She didn’t say, “The Lord spoke to me saying...” But the Lord did speak to her, and through her to me, to reveal God’s blessing. Maybe this lesson in the Potter’s House could help us notice and listen a little better that we might hear the word of the Lord in our lives.

So, Jeremiah, “...Went down to the potter’s house, and there the potter was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in his hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me...”

Now, I have no way of knowing for sure, but I suspect that Jeremiah’s experience may not have been much different from ours. He watched, he observed, and an insight came to him and he recognized it as a God moment. You see, Jeremiah does not say, “The Lord spoke to me in an audible voice and here I am dictating it for you, word for word.” He says, “The word of the Lord came to me.” And more often than not, when we say that a word or an insight or a revelation came to us, we are not reporting a voice, are we?

So, maybe we can learn from Jeremiah and our fellow camper. Make a practice of taking any little thing that catches your attention and meditating on it. Reflect, and be open to the insights that come to you, for very often it is in such things that the word of the Lord comes to us.

Some of you are familiar with the practice of lectio divina, or spiritual reading, where you meditate on a word or phrase that catches your attention in something you read, and allow that word or phrase, turned over and over in your mind, to become something through which the word of the Lord comes to you. What Jeremiah, and the camper, are showing us is the same thing but without words. It doesn’t have to be a word or phrase from something you read; it can just as readily be a little thing you observe. I suspect that most of Jesus’ parables began in exactly that way. A little thing observed and reflected upon, and the word of the Lord comes to us.

So, how do we respond to the word of the Lord that comes to us? Or how do we respond to what God is trying to do with us? If we had read one more verse, we would have heard the people of Israel responding to the message that Jeremiah receives in the potter's house by saying, "It's no good. We're hopeless. We can't change. Our destiny is out of our hands."

I know that the vision in the potter's house can be quite a threatening one. We are the clay. God is the potter. God's hands will do whatever God's hands will do, and there is nothing much we can do about it. To some people these images can be disturbing and threatening. God's hands close in on us and seek to impose God's will on us.

But actually, the message of Jeremiah's vision is quite the opposite. It is not suggesting that God has all the power and there is nothing we can do to change God's mind. In fact, the idea of God changing His mind in response to what we do is explicitly stated in the passage. The central image of the vision is of clay that is refusing to cooperate; clay that is resisting the will of the potter and not coming out the way the potter intends. And the potter may have to change his mind about what to do with this clay accordingly. So clearly, the vision puts forth a relatively equal and two-way relationship between us and God. It doesn't call us to a fatalistic resignation, but to a willing and voluntary submission.

I want us to think about this. If we're not being molded by God, what are we being molded by? Are we being molded by our own thought processes? That's a pretty scary thought to me! Are we being shaped by the opinions of others? Are we being formed by our culture today, the trends, whatever is popular? We're being shaped by something. What is it? And what drives it? We are quite the individualistic culture and sometimes it is driven by pride and ego, so we have to check that.

The image of God's hands molding us like those of a potter are only threatening if we are determined to stay as we are and resist being changed. If we believe that God has our best interests at heart, and knows even better than we know ourselves what we could become, given the chance, then being reshaped by God's hands will be a welcome and promising prospect. It is here in God's hands that we can find the fulfillment of the yearning, deep in our hearts, to be all that we ever dreamed we could be; all that we were created to be.

But the one thing that we most need to be in order to allow that to happen, is pliable, or flexible. Because sure, like the clay Jeremiah saw on the wheel, we will frequently go wrong; go out of shape. But as long as we remain soft enough and open enough to be remolded in the hands of the divine artisan, such mistakes and deformities are no threat to the final outcome. We simply submit again to the loving and skillful hands of God, and the ugly lumps will be smoothed out and the beauty we were destined for will emerge.

We are only in danger from the hands of God if we harden into our present shape and refuse to ever change again. This is better illustrated in the next chapter where Jeremiah takes a completed clay jar, one that has already been fired and glazed in its final

shape, and smashes it to show what will happen to those who have become too hard and inflexible to ever change their ways. I remember an old t-shirt slogan that said, "Some people's minds are like concrete—all mixed up and permanently set." Jeremiah's image is similar, although it is about our whole lives and behaviors, not just the state of our minds. Clay is a better image, because, unlike concrete, it can stay pliable for a long time and keep on being reworked over and over, as often as required.

God has created you and destined you to become something beautiful and extraordinary; fearfully and wonderfully made. God loves you and will not willingly give up on you. No matter how much your life goes out of shape, if you will remain pliable and open to change, you can trust God to continue to work with you.

As people who come together today, there's at least some part of us that wants to be formed by God or we wouldn't be here today. Today would have been a good day to sleep in. It took effort to get up, but we did it! We're here! We want something beyond ourselves to shape us.

I like the saying, "Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet." That's true for all of us. We're a work in progress. God is continuing to work on us.

Like the patient potter, God is willing to mold us again when we resist and damage our own lives. Life is a series of new beginnings. No failure in our lives need be fatal or final. God gave new beginnings to Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, Peter and others when they failed—and God certainly can do the same for us today.

Maybe sometimes we get tired and frustrated. We really want to change and be molded by God, but it seems like we keep making the same mistakes. We intend to say something really nice to the difficult person we know, but once again we say something unkind. Sometimes we get tired of trying and want to throw our hands up and not try any more. We take things one day at a time. We start again today.

We made it here, because we believed this God, this power greater than us, could transform us into the people God wants us to be.

So I need to ask you, on the cusp of this new program year, how will you approach each new day? With enthusiasm for what God may have in store? With joy to behold all that God has provided for us, knowing that God is the potter and we are clay? Awakening every morning asking God to further mold us and make us and continue to change us into what God dreams for us?

Yes, there are choices ahead for all of us. Indeed, Jeremiah has some good lessons for us from the Potter's House.