

Jeremiah ----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.

Luke 14 -----The Cost of Discipleship

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

September 4, 2016

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14: 25-33

Political, Personal, and at Great Cost

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Like clay in the potter's hands. This image of seeing and hearing God's word in the potter's studio is a lyric writer's dream. It melds quite naturally into poetry, song writing, and schmaltzy images of God as the potter and humankind as the ever-moldable clay. Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me. O Spirit of the Living God. I happen to like that song and the message it conveys. And there are plenty more of these clay-themed songs, often set to a more contemporary beat. So much so that there's even a popular Christian group who have played together for 20 years called "Jars of Clay." And if all these metaphors were taken from the Genesis story or from the Corinthians "treasure in clay jars" passage rather than this text from Jeremiah, the image would, of course, be spot on. God forms the earth-man, *adamah*, out of the mud of the ground and breathes life into his nostrils. That's a beautiful image of our groundedness, our earthiness, our willingness to be formed and sculpted by the master artist.

But that's not what's going on in Jeremiah! Instead the prophets have been known from time to time to take comforting images and turn them radically on their heads. They are jerks that way, which makes it hard to tell sometimes if you are listening to a true prophet or just an angry person with an axe to grind. Any song written to convey the message of this text wouldn't be quite so inspirational. In fact, it would be downright frightening. God in this text, is a ruthless kind of potter. The piece at work on the wheel is not meeting God's specifications, so God

demolishes it. Squashes it into a pancake. Or throws it aside as worthless, and begins with a new piece. Just as the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand, O house of Israel. This is not good news! And you can't turn it into a hit on the Christian music charts, that's for sure.

Jeremiah goes on to say that Israel has angered God, infuriated God really, with her stubbornness and evil ways. God is not joking around. God will take any nation or kingdom that thinks it is above it all and can do its own thing, and squash it, with no more effort than it takes for the potter to smush down the wet clay and form it into something else. God is willing to change the divine mind, BUT, human change has to happen first, or else, be on the lookout for significant consequences.

So I am very sorry to have to say that this pottery reference is political, not personal. And it tends to be bad news for us when God gets political. It's always difficult for us to say exactly where God is and what God is doing, and it gets even more complicated to try to analyze God's actions beyond the scope of our own personal experience and figure out what God intends for groups and nations. I find it far easier to claim evidence of God's action in my own life than to predict or declare God's attitude toward any given political situation or national difficulty. If we did have a modern day Jeremiah, would we be able to recognize him? The far reaching range and radical nature of all the voices claiming to speak from God's perspective gets complicated, and I say that knowing that it is included in my job description to do a bit of spiritual interpretation on God's behalf in a habitual kind of way from this very platform.

Therefore, I will gladly admit that I find myself asking the same questions that may have occurred to you in hearing this text read this morning: Do any nations or kingdoms today have God's approval? Is God's disapproval something we should be worrying about more often? Is it correct to interpret a nation's rise or fall as indicative of how God feels about its action or

inaction? The prophets often speak of widening discrepancies between the rich and the poor, or constant warfare, or droughts or floods or famine as hints of God's retribution. These are familiar conditions even now. We can point to the charts that compare outrageous levels of CEO pay to that of their lowest paid employees. We can monitor the news headlines that read more like battle-lines both in physical destruction and wars of words. We can lament the drought in California or the flooding in Louisiana and West Virginia and notice that we have a long, long, long way to go in terms of realizing the prophetic dreams of peace between nations and harmony with mother earth.

My suspicion though is that if we go looking for gloom and doom, we're almost always going to find it. We do reap the consequences of our bad behaviors. It's one of the things that sin does. If we keep going in the same bad direction, the condition will only get worse. Maybe that's why God's words are put in Jeremiah's mouth thusly, saying, "I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil ways, and amend your ways and your doings." The call of the prophet is a call for turning, for looking the other way, for seeing from a different perspective, and then for choosing a different path. When the lowest paid employee becomes a real person with needs and wants and not a barrier to making the highest profit... when the enemy is recognized as a human being because of a stirring photo or familiar story... when we choose to respect the earth as our home and quit treating it as a trash pit... all of these things allow us to turn back to God and be the kind of people, the kind of nation, the kind of humanity that God wants us to be.

The prophets, in their interpretations of God's condemnation tend to be political, and there are plenty of times we need to hear their scathing messages and respond with both deep sorrow and swift action to rectify the injustices of the world. But Jesus, who was also a prophet

extraordinaire, gets personal and asks us to pay the price at the highest levels. To be his disciple means taking up your cross, risking power and popularity, rejecting family, giving up personal possessions, and being willing to give up your very life as part of the cost of changing the world. When Jesus calls for a turn-around, it gets personal fast. Both are needed – the broad scope of national humility, and the radical commitment of those who see the cost and are willing to pay for it to the bitter end.

Our everyday existence is not always shaped by such thinking. Very few of us wake up in the morning feeling the charge on our shoulders to change the world. But we do wake up grateful to God for another day. And I dare say we do wake up with the intention of following Christ and imitating his spirit in the choices that we make throughout the day. Those are not easy things to do. The prophet's voice, in today's context, may not be about announcing God's punishment for wicked sinners, but the prophetic voices do remind us how we have wounded each other and fractured our communities and nations. The prayer, the yearning, even in God's hands, is for us to change and do something about our mess. The call of Christ is to make that change our highest priority – over the priorities that easily suck us in like appeasing family or consuming more stuff. So when you wake up tomorrow morning, be mindful that the world won't change without you, without me, without all of us working together to make a difference. It may be hard to see the fruits of our labor. That's Jesus' point. The project may not get done without a full exhaustion of our resources. The clay on the wheel may be utterly flattened before the new vessel gets formed. May you be blessed with just enough foolishness, just enough of the prophet's gumption, just enough of Christ's call within you to believe that you can make a difference in this old world so you will do those things that others say cannot be done. Amen.

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deeply and from our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this old world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.