

## The Potter and the Clay

Jeremiah 18:1-11 Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest September 4, 2022

One of the more vivid memories of a summer spent at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, was participating in the annual class in ancient pottery-making. Walking out in the early morning into the Painted Desert, where talus slopes of black, grey and crimson lay beneath the towering red rock mesas, we would carefully select and gather up our clays within sight of the simple adobe house where Georgia O'Keefe once did her best painting.

Under the cottonwoods outside the graphic arts center stood a number of potter's wheels alongside squat, earthen kilns. And there, in the relative coolness of late afternoon, a crowd of people gathered round a potter who was working with the same tools and techniques that capture the attention of Jeremiah six centuries before the birth of Christ.

She took the shapeless clay and placed it on the upper wheel. She gave the lower, heavier wheel a few deft kicks that set the clay spinning. Her skillful hands guided and controlled the emerging shape of a small, Anasazi-like jar. Her sensitive fingers molded a rim at exactly the right place. And within less than two minutes, a chunk of moist clay had become a graceful container.

The potter took another piece. She started to work. Something went wrong. She mashed the clay down into a lump again and started over. And the crowd gasped, feeling what Jeremiah must have felt when he watched the potter at his wheel. Yet the Lord had a deeper purpose in calling Jeremiah down to the potter's house. *"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done?"* Jeremiah would learn from the potter that it was not fortune or fate which was shaping Israel's future. It was the sovereign power of God.

I

Our text from Jeremiah for today graphically reminds us that no matter how independent we think we are, no matter how "on-top-of-things" we see ourselves, no matter how "in-control" we believe ourselves to be: the fact is we are still essentially creatures of clay. We are being worked, shaped, molded and stretched by the unseen hands of the One who made us, and who continues to make us throughout every turn of the wheel.

As a younger man, I loved to quote the final four lines from a poem called "Invictus," recently made popular by a movie about South Africa. *"It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll,--I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."* Now that I'm a little older, a little more humble and hopefully somewhat wiser, I've come to realize that my life in God isn't about what's written on a scroll any more than it's about trying to

captain my own soul. I want Christ to be the Lord and captain of my soul—and not myself! I’ve come to realize that such heroic sentiments are really illusory. We must learn to look beyond the confines (friendly or otherwise) to truly discern the gracious touch of God’s fingers in fashioning, again and again, something good, and beautiful, and true to take shape in our living.

## II

The Parable of the Potter is the best-known of all Jeremiah’s oracles. Just as a potter “throws” a vase upon the wheel, so too is a parable a “para-bole,” a story meant to “be thrown” alongside the historical life we now live.

During the final years of the little kingdom of Judah, God called Jeremiah to prophesy to the house of Israel, calling the people to return to the Covenant God made with them at Mt. Sinai. His message was one of national repentance, a return to the morality of old. He warned that if the people would not listen to God, disaster would befall them. Jeremiah was imprisoned more than once for his fiery confrontations to power. In many ways, his sorrow and suffering were a prefiguration of Christ’s own. *“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?”* says the Lord. These words were meant for King Jehoiakim and the nation of Judah, but they carry a message for our time as well.

## III

This Labor Day weekend, we can be thankful for the blessings of living in a democracy in this bountiful land we call home. But even a cursory glance at history will show us that nations rise and nations fall. And when they do fall, they are usually undone from corrupting influences from within more than external threats from without--as ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, the Ottoman Empire, and more recently the Soviet Union all bear witness to. Are we fated to experience the same thing? Our text from the Book of Jeremiah makes its abundantly clear that it is not fate which determines our destiny, but the truth of God’s sovereign will. God’s kingdom is coming among us. And our response to that kingdom will determine how God will shape—or reshape—our future. There are no free passes. And no guarantees. Things could get better. Or things could get worse. The nation being shaped today is in a very real sense, through our collective practice of politics and culture, and justice, our moral response to the sovereignty of God. And as anyone who has “worked” with clay knows, the receptiveness of the clay, how malleable it is, has a great effect on what can be done with it. Will we continue to grow and flourish? Or will our uniquely American composite of clays collapse?

## IV

Another thing we learn from our text is that for Jeremiah that morning, revelation followed obedience. *“Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear my*

words...” Jeremiah had to “get up and go,” and so must we, if we wish our spiritual lives to go forward. The potter’s house was located south of the city walls in the Valley of Hinnom, just outside the Potsherd Gate. There Jeremiah stood and watched as the potter worked at his wheel. Verse 4 states, *“And whenever the vessel he made of clay was ‘marred’ in the potter’s hand, he re-worked it into another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to do.”* Please note the text does not say the clay was marred “by” the hand of the potter. Note also that the potter does not discard the clay, but starts over again to make something else, something “good” according to the potter’s plans. God does not “discard” us either, but keeps on working with us. God’s hands are always present, molding us not for evil, but for good.

The Hebrew word for “marred” also means “immoral.” As sinful, human people, we know that, being “clay,” we bring to God our flecks and our flaws, our follies and our failures. And God goes to work faithfully--with us and with our situation--making out of the “stuff” of our living something useful, and beautiful, and good. Sometimes there is failure. Often there is pain. But the wheel keeps spinning...

- How many of us have started out on a career with high hopes, only to have something happen, and we find ourselves without a job, trying to figure out what’s going to come next?
- How many of us have said “I do” on our wedding day, only to suffer the pain of a failed marriage years later, wondering how we will ever start over again?
- How many of us have experienced a sudden loss of physical ability, a terminal medical diagnosis, or the loss of a loved one?

The Parable of the Potter offers a theology of repentance and personal growth, where we find our lives in the hands of a loving God who is intimately involved with our story and is not about to let us go. God loves us and desires nothing less than full communion with us, and so God works tirelessly and faithfully to transform us, making something gracious and redemptive from out of our flaws and failures. In his comments on this passage, G. Campbell Morgan observes, *“the potter was not fooling with the clay, he was not playing with it, he was not amusing himself! It was work, it was serious; there was purpose in it.”*

Some have seen in this parable nothing but the fist of God mashing our puny attempts at happiness, like Captain Ahab does in Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick.” *“I am the master of my fate! I am the captain of my soul!”* In point of fact, Jeremiah’s parable offers us a bright and blazing hope, for here we are being shown that God will *never* give up on us. If the God’s fingers are thwarted in their original intent, never mind; God reforms the clay and carries out something new—and this time successfully. Often enough, it is through our own apparent failures that God creates in us something unimaginable and unforeseen, surprising us with joy. And throughout that melding and molding, God’s loving hands remain faithful.

## Conclusion

How then do we conform our life to God? By seeking to feel and discern the Potter's hand. Like clay upon a spinning wheel, these hands will always bring us back to the Center. So must our lives be centered in the will of God. When the centrifugal forces of evil seek to pull us apart: forces like pride, anger, greed or lust—then we will experience, often quite profoundly, God's fingers pressing us toward the center of the wheel, drawing us back to the heart of the matter, where our lives can take shape again.

Irenaeus, one of the earliest theologians from the second century, wrote these compelling words: *"If then, you are the work of God, await the hand of your Maker, who fashions everything in due course...Keep your heart soft and pliable for Him; retain the form in which the Artist fashioned you, having moisture in yourself, lest, becoming hard, you should lose the marks of His fingers..."*

Let us pray:

O God, you are Potter, and we are the clay. Our life is held in your hands. Give us the grace of pliability, and make us willing to trust you with all our flecks and flaws. Loving God, in Jesus Christ you set before us a vessel of surpassing grace, the model of our true humanity. So mold and fashion us, we pray, that our lives may imitate his own, and as we spin out our days and years before you, may our hearts be ever-centered upon the Wheel of your redeeming love, O Lord and Giver of life.

Amen.