

## Sermon Jeremiah 18: 1-11 September 4, 2016

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will make you hear My words." Then I went down to the potter's house, and saw that he was working at the wheel. But the vessel that he was making from clay was spoiled by the potter's hand; so he made it over, reworking it and making it into another pot that seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" says the Lord. "Look carefully, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or kingdom, that I will uproot and break down and destroy; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent and reverse My decision concerning the devastation that I intended to do. Or at another time I might speak about a nation or kingdom that I will build up or establish; and if they do evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will reverse My decision concerning the good with which I had promised to bless them. Now then, say to the people of Judah and to the citizens of Jerusalem, 'Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I am shaping a disaster and working out a plan against you. Turn back, each of you from your evil way; correct your habits and change your actions for the better.'"

Metaphor is the language of God, isn't it? We can't see God... but the human spirit yearns to know God... so we look for and we create pictures and symbols that tell us about God. The prophets and writers of the Hebrew Scriptures were masters of the metaphor, using any word, any image, any actions, any-thing to speak to the Israelites the language of God... in words and images they'd understand. God as guiding shepherd; God as nursing mother; God as rock; God as lover; God as the bread of life; God as creator, and artist. In Jeremiah's prophesy his metaphor of understanding God is as a potter shaping clay. God is actively forming,

molding, and shaping Israel as a vessel of beauty and function, as a faith community.

It's often our image or understanding of God that God did all of God's major work thousands of years ago with an ancient people... and that God's creative, exacting, loving, persistent work in kneading and forming a people - God's people who are both beautiful and useful - is all in the past. But scripture was written to inform and engage us; we are meant to find ourselves in the stories and the metaphors. We are meant to see ourselves through Jeremiah's vision as God's people, whom God is still shaping on the potter's wheel. We come together to worship, to pray, to sing, to tell the stories of God, to practice love and forgiveness with each other, to work together in the world for justice and peace... because God is still shaping us and molding us into a people who are beautiful and useful. Is that your image of us, as God's people, that that we are beautiful; that love and hope and mercy shine out of us like stars shine in the night sky? Is that your image of us, as God's people, that we are useful; that our service and care for those in need is like light in the darkness or home for the lost?

You have a piece of clay to work with... in part because the physicality of working with clay as you read and hear Jeremiah's words is its own metaphor and lesson. [The Lord said] "Look carefully as the clay is

in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel." As you work this clay into an image of us, as the people of God, how do you see us as something beautiful and useful? When you come forward for Communion I'm going to invite you to bring what you've shaped and put it on the altar.

There is reason and motivation to practice our faith. Faith practices, or spiritual disciplines, mold and shape us into the image of Jesus, and God can use us, and is seen in us, as individuals and as a faith community. I have a couple of clay pots made by a friend, and she told me how challenging it is to work with clay... how unwieldy it felt, and hard and messy to mold, and how often she smushed it into a lump to start again... because she was working the clay to make something beautiful and useful. That's a metaphor for the Christian life... it's the metaphor God gave to Jeremiah to share with Israel: either the clay is formed into what the potter envisions - something beautiful and useful - or it's smashed into a lump for another time or another purpose.

Last week my sister told me how much she likes to watch Joel Osteen because he's so positive ("I know," she said to me, "that you probably don't like him because he preaches the 'prosperity gospel' [God only wants good for you, God's will is for you to flourish, and be successful] but my pastor only preaches about how hard the Christian life is.") I said, "I

don't like the prosperity gospel because Jesus didn't value those things... success and wealth and rewards. But isn't the spiritual life both receiving the good news that Jesus Christ lived and died for love of you, and to take away all that separates you from God... and also that God has expectations of you and work for you and... if you are to be beautiful and useful in the world... that God has to shape and mold you... and that can be difficult and painful to give up your own self-image to be reformed into God's image?" I think my sister's eyes glazed over... she saw a sermon coming on.

We are made of clay... easily shaped and molded by the world around us. The book of Jeremiah's prophecies was written during a time of transition; his nation was in ruins, overrun by the Babylonian empire, and his people were carried away into captivity and slavery. We also live in a time of transition as the things we've clung to and relied on in the past - the norms, the values, the protection from want and fear and enemies, our place in the world - are carried away. And what's still to come, God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, seems farther away, almost like a fairy tale. Everything we cling to and rely that's not God is a false god even if it promises comfort and security.

Jeremiah exposed the false gods people had turned to in desperation, not trusting God to be active and working even in the time of

transition, of fear, and unrest, in exile and captivity. Jeremiah told the Israelites that the clay in the potter's hand was spoiled (comparing the clay to God's people who were stubborn, faithfulness, indifferent, self-centered, and fearful) and that unless they changed God (in the words of my friend Katie, who made these two little pots) would smooch the clay into a lump to start over, into something pleasing to God, something beautiful and useful. This is the fate of God's people, Jeremiah said, if they didn't repent and... "correct your habits and change your actions for the better."

There is judgment in these words... and we, as God's people, need to hear it. If we are not - as a community, as a congregation - beautiful and useful, God has no use, no purpose for us. We have been called to change the world... by how we *love God* with everything we are, and *how we love all others* as well as we love ourselves. There is little in the world that encourages this way of living... so we meet together as God's people... we read scripture, we study, we sing, we serve, we ask and offer forgiveness, we are generous... and in all of these ways God is shaping and forming us as clay in God's hands, into the people of God... into something beautiful and useful.

Or we can choose not to let God form us because it takes mindfulness on our part, and genuine effort, or because we've never done

it that way, or because we don't want to be seen as being too-religious. We can choose not to gather, not to exercise our spiritual muscles, not to let God shape and sculpt us. And in Jeremiah we read the results of not bending our will to God's... not allowing God to be the potter.

God would tell Jeremiah to buy a potter's jug and "Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those with you, and you shall say to the people, 'Thus says the Lord: So will I break this people... because they have stiffened their necks and refused to hear My words.'" There is judgment for those who turn away from God....

But there is not hopelessness. With God, there is always hope. What we see in God's stories is that God looks for people who are willing to be molded and shaped and used by God. May this be said of us... that through our devotion to God and our love for others we are being shaped into something beautiful and useful. God continues to be active and invested in our common life, in our congregation, as God was in the days of Jeremiah. And God is determined, out of love for the world, to shape us into an alive and passionate congregation who live to experience and express Christ's love. We can be sculpted by the Potter's hand or we can resist... Jeremiah tells us that God can break down and dispose of what is not beautiful and useful for the healing and redemption of the world.

Before we turn to the Prayer of Confession and Communion, please turn to page 382 in the red hymnal. Let's sing "Have Thine Own Way" - verses 1 and 4.

"Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after Thy will; while I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way. Hold o'er my being absolute sway. Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see; Christ only, always, living in me."