

Jeremiah 18: 1-11

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

These are the words which came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house and there I will tell you what I have to say." So I went down to the potter's house, and found him working at the wheel. Now and then, a vessel he was making out of the clay would be spoilt in his hands, and then he would start again and mould it into another vessel to his liking. Then, the word of the Lord came to me. "Can I not deal with you, Israel" says the Lord, "as the potter deals with the clay? You are clay in my hands like the clay in the potter's, o house of Israel. At any moment I may threaten to uproot a nation or a kingdom, to pull it down and destroy it. But if the nation which I have threatened turns back from its wicked ways, then I shall think better of the evil I had in mind to bring on it. Or, at any moment, I may decide to build or to plant a nation or a kingdom. But if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, I shall think better of the good I had in mind for it. God now, and tell the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, that these are the words of the Lord: I am the potter."

Read verses 1-4

A sermon ought to be like that. A creation of something new, and fresh. Who creates it? The Spirit of God creates it, working through the written word of scripture, the hard work of the preacher, and through the attentive and true listening of the people.

When real preaching happens, the word of God is faithfully proclaimed and faithfully heard – when that happens, it's as though a brand new pot is created. God takes the old stuff of our lives – the way we've been living, the way we choose to see the world, the hurt, the fatigue, the selfishness – God takes all of that, and squashes it down into a big lump and all of a sudden, offers it to us new.

A new way to be, a new way to see – a new way to live

Offered up glistening and smooth and fresh from the wheel and ready for the kiln. Offered by God who is busy making all things new.

THAT's what a sermon is. That's what happened when he walked into that potter's house.

I can still remember the day I made this bear. I was in Mrs. Bursthaler's grade 4 class, and of all the subjects we had in grade 4 I liked art the least. (well, art and phys ed were probably tied for last) Both were quite embarrassing for me. They did not come naturally at all. I couldn't draw, or paint, and making things with my hands seemed out of the question. My hands just couldn't make anything that looked like...anything. I'm still like that today.

But I do remember the day I made this bear. We were each given a lump of stuff I think it was called asbestos but my friends say no – anyway, a lump of stuff and told to make an animal. I remember the feeling of forming the damp cold ball into different kinds of shapes, then squishing it down and starting again....and when this came out I was so proud of it

The thrill of creating something new is a powerful feeling. Those of you who are artists of various kinds will know better than I. Working with wood, with cloth,that's such a gift, and I wonder if you experience strong, spiritual feelings at those moments of creation? I have to say I envy you that. Andmaybe having children is a bit like that is it do you think? Creating from your love, from your very body a brand new human being – I imagine that can give you a sense of being deeply connected to the centre of things – to the creator.

When we began the little series on Jeremiah two weeks ago, I talked about the visual arts; how being here in this community has made me aware of the power of the image in a way that is ...not new, exactly because I've always been aware of it, butin a new way I think. There are so many artists in this community – and everywhere you go, you see evidence of that.

Well – this was my creation in grade 4. And what I'm trying to say is that the act of creating something out of nothing – making something what wouldn't have existed at all had you not made it –

There's something about that experience that can bring you to a sense of the Holy, can bring you into the presence of God.

I think that's what happened to Jeremiah. Although he himself was not the one doing the creating, he was watching a potter throw a pot. And as he watched, "the word of the Lord came to me" he says.

Isn't it strange the things or the moments that you'll get an insight like that? I'm constantly amazed at the variety of ways God uses to reach us and speak to us. You have to be open, of course, but God uses people, nature, objects...moments, historical forces, political movements....

And who KNOWS what we'd hear if we were more attuned to the range of God's voice??

Jeremiah seemed to understand that. He was quite a preacher, and used some fabulous methods and illustrations. Once, he walked around the city with a yoke on his neck. Another time, he buried his underwear in the ground, then dug them up and said that God would do the same to them if they didn't smarten up. His famous temple sermon is in chapter 7 – it was more traditional at least in form, but what he said would blow you away. Read it this afternoon just for fun. And it was that sermon that Jesus called on when he turned over the tables of the money changers all those years later. The lasting power of a sermon.

Once, to make his point, he bought a field instead of preaching a traditional sermon. Those old prophets really knew how to get the people's attention. Isaiah uses a courtroom scene a lot, writing little plays where the people are put on trial and God brings witnesses against them...

So in this case, he uses an image. The image of the potter and the clay. For Jeremiah, that image was what he needed at that moment to make clear to him God's word to the people. What does that image say to you? The potter and the clay.

The first thing it says to me is intimacy. The potter has an intimate relationship with the clay. The potter touches, shapes, smooths, works, corrects, enjoys the clay. You can tell that when you watch a potter at

work. Same with someone who loves to work with wood – you can tell they love it. The feel, the smell,
...

Or those who dig in the dirt and garden, or who work with fabric....ever notice people who feel fabric?

It's a love of the stuff. The potter is like that with the clay. Not removed from it, loves it, enjoys it. I like that image for God. God does not deal with us at arms' length, but is intimately involved in the life of the world. (remember that old movie Ghost? – The scene at the potter's wheel is so intimate, so beautiful, that's something of the passion that God has for us. God, the passionate potter.)

For me, this image only works, though, if I state upfront that Jeremiah and I disagree on one thing. Jeremiah and the other prophets were clearly of the understanding that at least sometimes when bad things happen, it's like God's hand squashing down clay to make something new. I need to state up front that I do not believe that God makes bad things happen, that God punishes individuals or nations in that way. I don't know where you stand on that, but for me this is not the God I have experienced or worship. Nor are human beings passive lumps of clay to be moulded at the whim of an outside force. We are co creators with God in our lives. The hands that shape us are our own as well as our creator's. That's how God works. The clay, we're told by those who should know, cannot be shaped into something that is against the nature of the material. God works WITH us to bring form and life to the substance of our lives.

So how to understand the brokenness, the sinfulness, the times when we are crushed? There are consequences for actions that is certain. But to say that when something horrible has happened, it is the hand of God to punish or to teach– that cannot be so. *It simply cannot be so.* God brings life out of death; God brings new form to lives crushed down like clay, but *God does not do the crushing.* – If this is not where you stand theologically that's fine and I'd love to have a conversation with you. I just need to say that so you know where Jeremiah and I part company.

The image of the potter only works for me when I work at it and shape it – turn it to match the God I know in Jesus. When horrible things happen, and we feel crushed down like a lump of clay, that is not the end. It is never never never the end. God can and does work in our lives, work with us, as co creators. When a potter makes a pot, it's usually not just to look at but it's for a purpose. To hold something; to put things in and pour them out.

So – if you were a pot – what kind are you? What's inside you – what are you holding, what are you full of? And what do you pour out ? crack easily? (remember too, Paul used this image in II Corinthians...he says : “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” – Earthen vessels. That's us. Flawed to be sure but God not only makes us, but *trusts us to hold the treasure of God's very life and love* –

What kind of a vessel are you? And what kind of a vessel are we , here at WUC? What are we full of and what do we pour out for the world to see and receive?

What kind of vessel are you? Strong enough to withstand the wear and tear of life? Do you chip and crack easily? Are there flaws in you? Of course there are – as our old friend Leonard would say

There is a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in. The truth is that you have been made for a purpose – you have a high and holy calling to be a vessel – precious and beautiful in and of yourself but more than that – a vessel to hold and to pour out the Spirit of God.

I love this poem by Marge Piercy about being useful, and I believe she must have had, at least in the back of her mind somehow, this Jeremiah reading:

*The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.*

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.*

*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

Whatever else this image says to you today

Let it be for us the word of God calling us to trust that whatever brokenness there may be, God is working with us lovingly and intimately, to bring about a new creation

Let it be for us the Word of God – showing us yet again that we are made for a purpose – we are flawed vessels, made of the stuff of the earth and made to embody to hold and to pour out the astounding hope and love and life that is the gift of a good and wise creator.

May God bless you as you think about these things