

Message: "Reworking Clay"

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 18:1-11

18The 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." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The 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. ⁵Then 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. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but 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. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but 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.

¹¹Now, 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.

A few days ago, I saw a woman at a bus stop on 39th street wearing a tiara. You know, the Disney princess-type small crown that goes on top of the head? This woman didn't look like a princess of the fairy tale sort - she was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, and I think she was wearing flip-flops; I didn't really notice the rest of her accoutrements, for I was double-glancing at the sparkly adornment upon her head. She wasn't young; she looked to be around fifty or sixty years old; she had an air about her that made me think of a hard life, perhaps long working hours for low pay, maybe dealing with a chronic health conditions or significant losses throughout her past - whatever the case may be, she looked to me like one who bore burdens that all too often color the lives of those who struggle. She was the sort of sight that, were it not for the glitter on her head, I don't think she'd draw much attention at all to passers-by. But she was wearing a tiara on her head! Even for Missoula, where strange sights and unique expressions of humanity are not uncommon, this one stood out, at least to me. And as I looked at her for all of the ten or fifteen seconds I had as I drove by, I knew there was more to her story than I could possibly know from a quick glance - and I couldn't help but look at her with a sense that she had found something to celebrate.

Maybe that's what it looks like when the former clay of someone's life is being reworked? A life perhaps full of burden and brokenness, newly topped with a glorious ornament signaling some kind of new beginning?

Jeremiah was witness to this analogy for life's transformation as he witnessed a potter at work, creating a vessel that turned out spoiled - please note: this is Jeremiah's perception, not the potter's. This is made clear as the potter,

seemingly without hesitation, took that original vessel and smoothly, deftly, began working it into something new, adding the material of the old into a new vessel, the combination of the two producing a better result. It's as if Jeremiah misses the point of the potter's perspective - **THAT NO CLAY IS BEYOND RECLAIMING, IF ADDED TO SOMETHING NEW.**

In this throw away world, it is no secret that we have a tremendous problem with waste - our world generates 380 million ton of single-use plastics that can take 20 to 500 years to decompose (some estimates put the decomposition rate at 1,000 years); climate change from hydrocarbon emissions is a demonstrable commodity which is becoming harder to deny (though many try!); it is estimated that one-third of all food produced for human consumption goes to waste, amounting to 1.3 billion tons each year, which is around one trillion dollars of value lost; there are countless examples like this, examples that our Green Team lifts up to us for increased awareness. Humans are very wasteful.

But perhaps the greatest waste humans create is their waste of each other - the devaluing of certain lives, the exclusion of certain groups, prejudice and racism and stereotyping of others who are considered lesser, impure, unworthy, or somehow inferior to others, who all too often look and act and live like the one doing the judging. In this world it is an all-too-common practice to treat each other as throwaway items - the amount of estrangement, the tendency towards conflict, the refusal to address inequity, the willingness to demean and abuse others - we so easily cast aside those whom we've labeled lesser for whatever reason comes to our mind, or whatever reason is suggested by society.

God will have none of this; this is confined to human behavior which will always be countered by God's insistence upon redemption, the recycling potential of every human creature. From God's perspective, there is nothing or no one beyond redemption; there is no waste when it comes to God's willingness to work new life into the old; there is no unwanted human being.

Rev. Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Marin-in-the-Fields in London; in his book "Humbler Faith, Bigger God," he says that "Christianity is not about imagining something perfect called creation and straining to get ourselves back to that ideal state; it's about taking the material of humankind and the surrounding world and universe, exploring the form of a relationship between God and us, and contemplating the governing idea that God the artist will go to any lengths to restore that relationship. In the words of Athanasius, "When a portrait . . . becomes obliterated through external stains . . . the subject of the

portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material." This is the story of Christianity, that God does not throw us away as flawed but reworks us into something more beautiful.

He continues to say "The art of congregational life is about starting with who we are and what life has given and done to us, and discovering together, through the imagination of God, a form we would never otherwise have assumed."

I leave you with a question that I wish every individual would ask themselves often, just to raise their awareness of both human limitation and redemption. Has your life ever needed reworking? A second start, or third, or tenth? Have you ever needed the transformation of a part of yourself that was broken, burned, betrayed, or buried into something new, something hopeful, something life-blessing? Sometimes, when we see that our lives need reworking, we fall into the dark pit of self-despise, where we feel like we are so broken, messed up, incapable, or fault ridden that we are beyond repair.

Nonsense, says God - and we need to hear that, loud and clear. But we need to say that to others as God's voice on earth, as God's love on earth; we as people of faith are the potter's apprentice, meant to convey the ability of the potter to work the old into the new; and as apprentices, we must apply our effort as well under the direction of our master. The potter is always ready to rework a new vessel out of the old, adding what may have been missing before - and perhaps what was missing was us.