

**“Come, go down to the potter’s house....”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, September 8, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11**

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my word.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 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. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 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. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 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. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 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. 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. Jeremiah 18:1-11

Will you pray with me. O Creator God, you are the potter extraordinaire. Be with us as we ponder what it means to be clay in your hands and the creations you would have us be as your vessels in this mixed up world. Amen.

I brought a visual aid with me today – a vase created by Tracy Adams of Saltbox Pottery in Woolwich. It can be used as a water pitcher, a flower vase or simply as a beautiful piece of art sitting on a shelf or in a sunny window. This vase stands as a symbol of what it means to be a valued vessel of God, the grand potter of us all – accepting the gift of life from God the potter’s creative hands, as we do our best to live out the desires of God and serve God’s purposes. The Grand Potter’s creative passion is fulfilled in our making, hopefully for the good, but not always.....

This vase was originally a ball of clay – like the ball of clay that the potter was moulding and remoulding in the allegory from the prophet Jeremiah we just heard. An allegory goes beyond being a simple metaphor. An allegory is “a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms, or a figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.” (on line dictionary)

Thus, through the concrete image of a potter throwing pots, Jeremiah brings the spiritual guidance of God to the wayward people of a war-torn world twenty-five hundred years ago. That’s about six hundred years before Jesus was born. It’s genius, really.... to use the image of a potter throwing pots to represent the nature of God in action.

I don’t know much of anything about throwing pots, beyond appreciating them when they are well thrown! But I do know that when one is at the potter’s wheel, if a blemish or inconsistency appears in the clay, and it isn’t corrected or smoothed out, it will prevent the clay from being moulded into a usable or appealing creation.

Jeremiah’s story of the potter and the clay suggests that God, as the ultimate potter, works and reworks the clay at the wheel of life upon which we each sit as a ball of

clay. Jeremiah's purpose in this story of the potter with his clay is to point out the inconsistencies, the blemishes, the imperfections, the wrong turns of the nation of Judah six hundred or so years before Jesus was born.

Jeremiah's message is a reminder of God's judgment upon those who have turned away from God and toward what is evil. BUT, Jeremiah says, God will change God's mind or remould what has gone awry on the wheel of life, if only the nation "turns from its evil." (Jer 18:8) Fortunately, the underlying theme of the entire Bible, from beginning to end is this -- we always, always have another opportunity to turn things around, to make things right between us and between us and God.

Old Testament professor, Kathleen M. O'Connor, writes, "The prophetic book of Jeremiah sears the soul, challenges the conscience, and promises hope to the wounded in body and spirit. Its principal subject is survival.... Jeremiah's life creates a rich symbol of the nation's demise and restoration. What happens to him will happen to the people. He remains unmarried and bears no children as a sign of the end of life in the land. He is arrested, imprisoned, and left in a cistern to die, narrowly escaping with his life. Like his compatriots, he loses everything, but he survives. He buys a plot of land to symbolize the renewed life that will come in the future. Even though the community does not listen to him, the people gain hope from the stories about his fidelity as he copes with suffering...."

The book of Jeremiah seeks to defend God from the charge of injustice or impotence in the fall of the nation of Judah. It strives to explain the catastrophe of the nation's exile and to restructure the world in its aftermath. The book does this, in part, by interpreting the national tragedy as the result of human sin, rather than divine caprice or impotence."<sup>1</sup> As we think about the news of the world now on a daily basis, is it all that different for us today? Not really....

I want to extend this biblical image just as I did last week with the question from Jeremiah, "Where is the Lord?" I want to take the image of potter and clay directly to what it means to us as individuals seeking to live as faithful followers of Jesus. It is an appropriate jump to take, I think, since it is individuals, like us, who make up communities, and nations. It is individuals, like us, who turn to or away from evil. It is individuals, like us, who make up God's creation. WE are the clay God fashions into useable pieces of human pottery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is tempting to see Jeremiah's story of potter and clay as a message from an angry God who is making threats against a willful and wayward people. I always keep in mind the words of Rev. Dr. Bill Imes, past President of Bangor Theological Seminary. He said in class one evening, "You know, God is not an angry old man who hates women!"

God is NOT an angry old man who hates everybody! There is another way to take Jeremiah's words. In a book entitled *Life Meditations*, Father Edward Lavin writes, "The Jesuit theologian Chardin sees our entire world, indeed the entire universe, as a great evolutionary movement toward perfection. He sees us all creating a universe that is more

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<sup>1</sup>Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible, NRSV*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 1051-1053.

and more in unity. This vast dream is thrilling, but it leaves each one of us with an intense responsibility. We are each of us called to make the world a better place. Our lives must be creative. We are not talking here about making pots; we are talking about the difficult human activity that produces a new, serious object or relationship or idea.... Creativity puts order into chaos, life into the inert, and beauty into the ordinary. In this scheme examples of creativity could include sweeping the street or balancing the books. The question for each of us is, 'Do our actions somehow, make the world better?'"<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah's potter, God, envisions a world "more and more related in unity." Jeremiah's potter moulds and remoulds the clay until the potter's hand extends to and becomes part of the creation of order out of chaos, vessel out of clay, life out of what has been inert.

God works with us, moulding and remoulding us throughout our lifetimes, to make the world a better place. Instead of words of threat coming from Jeremiah's God, can we see instead a reminder of responsibility? Can we see a reminder that we need to set our sights each day on how we, as God's vessels, can help make the world a more sane, safer place in which to thrive, not just live, but thrive?

"Come, let us go down to the potter's house," and there we will hear God's words. (Jer 18:2) Moulded vessels, followers of Jesus, or not – do our words and actions somehow help to make life better for those around us? Do we give heart and soul to the enterprise of becoming and being the creations God would be proud of?

Let the people say, "Amen."

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<sup>2</sup>Edward J. Lavin, S.J., *Life Meditations, Thoughts and Quotations for All of Life's Moments*, New York: Wing Books, 1993, p.