

“The Potter, the Clay, and the Way”

Jeremiah 18

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Introduction to Old Testament Lesson –

Through the summer the lectionary has touched on a number of the Old Testament prophets, usually just for a Sunday or two. But we’ll be hearing from the prophet Jeremiah for awhile now. Starting last Sunday, Jeremiah is the Old Testament reading for 9 weeks (if you include one from Lamentations, which is attributed to Jeremiah). Jeremiah has a lot to say, and often has some interesting ways of saying things – he uses lots of images and does some dramatic things to call attention to himself. Jeremiah is a prophet around 600 BC, during the tumultuous days that lead to the defeat of Jerusalem and the Jewish exile in Babylon. Jeremiah speaks to, and usually against, the Jewish political and religious leaders who he sees turning from God’s ways. And here in Jeremiah 18, in order to get his point across, Jeremiah goes to visit a pottery studio...

I’m not sure if you know about me that I am a school-geek – by which I mean I liked school – all the way from grade school thru grad school, I was someone who enjoyed going to class and doing homework and taking tests and writing papers. Liking all that stuff wasn’t always something that was good to broadcast to other students – and my school-geek testimony may not be exactly what the many of you who are actually returning to school in this Fall season want

to hear – whether as a student or teacher or some part in the world of school. Some of you may be excited...others not so much – probably a bit of a mix for all.

Although there are many parents, I know, who are ready for their kids to get back to school after a long hot summer! So we bless the teachers and leaders and students and staff and families for the year ahead.

But although I happen to bring up my geek-ish love of school just as the academic year is getting underway, I actually thought of it in connection with this passage from Jeremiah 18 – this pottery passage, about the potter and the clay. Part of what I liked about school is that I could do well – my brain was a good fit for the way school was done, so I could figure out how to do well – and I liked that. Or at least that was true for almost all of the subjects – but not for Art Class. With Art Class you had to do things like draw and paint and make things – and I didn't do that very well, and I couldn't just study harder to get better. Although my art teachers did a pretty good job of affirming all of us in our artistic expression, it was still humbling to me to realize I couldn't master art no matter how hard I tried, and nowhere was this more clear than at the pottery wheel! It was a big deal at my school when we got a pottery wheel – and a big deal for me when I got my chance at the wheel. But despite my great expectations and determination to create a pottery masterpiece (which I knew could serve well as a low-cost mother's day gift – mom's are always suckers for that kind of thing) – my time at the potter's wheel

was an exercise in frustration. My clay wobbled; my clay toppled; my clay took on a life of it's own...all sorts of fascinating forms emerging, none of which I intended. Simply making a pot on the potter's wheel was beyond me – and I think I had to stick with the pinch-pot style for mother's day.

With Jeremiah 18, that image of the potter's wheel is front and center – the potter and the clay – it's such a tangible and intriguing image, I think, that we're drawn to delve into it and see what it has to say. But as we do so, more than just talking about who is the potter and who is the clay and what all that means (which will be good to do), there is something about the use of this image itself that is good for us to reflect on. I bring up my Art Class experience not just to say I was a bad potter – maybe you were or are a good potter, or you might like to try...that's good – but I was thinking about my experience because what the prophet Jeremiah does really is something like an Art Class. Jeremiah uses images in a way that lets us know these aren't just a list of ideas about God and us and life for us to study and master in order to ace religion class. Faith is an art – there is a need to find images to point to things within us and beyond us – and for achievement-minded school-geeks like me, and in some way for each of you too, it's a good reminder that this is not a call not to master the subject, but to see how this image speaks to and comes alive in us – that is, to see how God speaks to us, and faith comes alive in us.

I think that's important as we hear this image, because there is the tendency as we encounter it to simply want to say what's what and who's who. And certainly the passage is clear about the potter and the clay – "...I am the potter, says the LORD..."; "like clay in the potter's hand are you in my hand, O Israel..." God = potter; Israel = clay. But once we've settled that...the real story here – the art of the image that we're drawn into - is in the interaction between the potter and the clay. That's what leads to the words about breaking down or building up nations – planting or plucking kingdoms; that's when we hear about God calling for people to amend their evil ways, even as God is said to be shaping evil plans. Those are the interesting, or perhaps disturbing, dynamics, with the potter and the clay.

It's that interaction, that relationship, between the potter and the clay that I think is the key here – so what's that about? What is happening here? Is it a power thing: with God imposing a heavy potter's hand on human destiny – a determinism of God rewarding good and dooming bad? Is it a 'whose side is God on?' sort of thing – with groups vying for God's favor? Is it a test to see who's best, and you can tell by who succeeds? As you might suspect, I don't think it's really any of those things. As we hear this word about nations rising and falling, being judged and blessed – the current that runs through it is really much deeper and broader than any one of those things. What this interaction of potter and clay is ultimately

about is God's ways shaping human ways towards life; it is about the revelation of God's truth – or you could say God's will – showing the way of life and shaping history towards wholeness; or I'll try it one more way...it's that the heart of God is an artist...with the intention and action of shaping, creating something good and beautiful within time and space. The real dynamic going on here is God's insistence on shaping life into wholeness...and God does not stand idly by – the potter is at work.

Can you see that? I think it's important to get the perspective that the real story here is about God's intention for life, because it's very easy to get stuck on judgment and condemnation in a passage like this. I was thinking of calling this sermon "Scary Potter" – partly because I thought that was kind of clever and all the Harry Potter fans might enjoy that – but mainly because that's the image you could get from Jeremiah: God the Scary Potter in search of the perfect pottery piece and intent on trashing the warped pieces.

And yes, we're given a strong word here of God's rejection of evil and God's will for good – but the point is not God holding art class in order to give As or Fs, to make a pass or fail list...the word is that God rejects the ways of death and sustains the ways of life - that is God's passion – God's creative action – God's will and way: to shape the world for good. And what's so interesting is that the problem going on for Israel, is that they are stuck just on the potter and the

clay, rather than the shaping, the relationship. The leaders of Israel say that God is THEIR potter...and they are the ONLY clay = so they're OK. And that's trouble – because that means they think God's will belongs to them, rather than they belong to will of God...that they shape what God does rather than God shaping them.

Last Fall, the renowned and profound theologian Walter Brueggemann lectured at Western Theological Seminary about Jeremiah – and Jill and I and a number of Hope Church folks were able to hear him – brilliant stuff. One of the themes he focused on was this idea of thinking God is on your side - and the dangers that led to for Israel, and for any people of faith or nation ever since. He talked about it as leading to a sense of “exceptionalism” that makes a group think they possess God's truth and favor, rather than a people always being shaped by, critiqued by, changed by, God's word. That's the thing that is being dealt with here – Jeremiah gives the word of God that shatters the idea that what God is about is promoting the agenda of a particular people (Israel the potter and God the clay!). God is not on the side of a particular group or people, or person – God is on the side of God's will – the way of God is that of shaping and creating for good.

That was the challenge for Israel – not to possess God, but to be shaped and changed by God's will and ways. And think of all the implications that has in our context... think of what that means for the church – not to see itself as possessing God's favor but as a vessel through which God brings life; think of what that

means for a nations and peoples and leaders – not to promote power over others but to use its resources for the blessing of all; think of what that means for cultures and races, genders and classes – that God’s way is not to protect the status of some but to promote the value of all. And what that means is that while the tendency of human life is to always want to anoint some one or some group as THE way – whether that anointing is religious or secular or in-between - the word of God will be a truth that is always changing, always molding and shaping toward life. The word of God will always have plucking up and breaking down to do, along with building and planting. A relationship with God always changes things – not us making God our own, but God making us into God’s own.

The God of creation and history is at work to change things, to shape life towards wholeness for all. And how does that happen? It is done through the shape of human faith and will and action that is faithful to God – the potter at work with the clay.

I’ve talked about the image broadly – the potter and clay isn’t just an individual image, but about Israel and the church and nations and peoples and groups. But then, too, it must be received as a truth for each of us, individually as well. We hear in Psalm 139 ‘you formed me, O God’ – God is my potter, yours – we are clay – and we need the relationship of God interacting with each of us. We need God’s word of judgment to change us – to break down and pluck up; we need

God's word of mercy and peace to change us, to plant in us and build us up. Our lives are meant to be shaped to God's ways and carry out God's will. It is in the potter and clay, the relationship of God and person for each one of us – through faithful lives – that the broader picture takes shape...for the church and nations and peoples and groups to reflect God's will and way. Let the image speak to us and form us – as individuals, as a church, in our shared lives: this creative potter - this remarkable clay...the way in which God's will takes shape in the world. AMEN.