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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 18: 1-11
Potter Sunday
Sermon preached with a live potter

“Come, go down to the potter’s house”

When Julia and I were at Montreat in June I threw a pot on a wheel for the first time ever. And while it was a lot of fun, may I say, it’s a lot harder than it looks!

I thought throwing a pot would be a bit of a no-brainer; that all I needed to do was sit at the wheel, clay in hands, and mold it into any shape I wanted to. Just like Demi Moore in Ghost. Ha!

I quickly learned it doesn’t quite work that way.

But luckily for me, I had a wonderful teacher, a patient teacher, named Martha, who would take my hands in hers when my pot was going off center, or it was getting a little thin at the top, or needed more water. She’d gently take my hands, and place them just right, so that my little bowl would turn into a magnificent work of art!

As I left the studio that night, one of the regulars told me I was lucky to have Martha as a teacher. “She’s one of the best,” she said. And I replied, “She sure is.” Martha taught me that working with clay takes practice. Clay may be supple and pliable, but it takes patience to work with it and make it into what I want it to be.

Jeremiah watched a potter at work (in the story we heard today) and likened the potter’s work with clay to God’s work with humans. Sometimes the pot gets marred on the wheel; and sometimes the clay doesn’t do what we want it to do. Likewise, sometimes people, who are created to do good, go astray; we don’t always do what God wants us to do. With clay, you can roll it back into a ball and start again, but with humans, we are more challenging. When I worked with clay it felt like the clay had a mind of its own. And guess what? So do humans! ⁱ

The people Jeremiah was preaching to have a mind of their own, too. As best we can tell, Jeremiah’s ministry spanned the time from just before Jerusalem’s fall to the years following it . . . which was a rough time in Israel’s history, to say the least. Jeremiah was very young when he was named a prophet; some say he may have been as young as 10 years old! King Josiah was king at the time; and he was a good king who tried to reform the people. He removed all of their shrines to false gods; and instituted worship practices that were in line with Jewish Law. Things were relatively peaceful during King Josiah’s reign . . . until they weren’t. At which time things quickly went from bad to worse; King Josiah was killed, so his son took the throne, but he was exiled to Egypt; his brother then

took the throne, but was assassinated; and then Jerusalem was taken by the Babylonians, and everything and everyone went into a total state of anarchy.

This is the situation when Jeremiah goes down to the potter's house, and sees the potter at work.

Now, Jeremiah would *not* have had to look very hard to find a potter. There would have been one on every corner. Potters were very busy people, because in those days, you had to go to a potter to get all your plates and bowls and dishes. The potters provided everything that we just take for granted.

Today, of course, we don't have to go to a potter to get our plates and dishes and cooking items. We can go to Target. So there are no longer potters around every corner.

But one thing that hasn't changed much is how a potter makes a pot. The potter that Jeremiah watched that day-nearly 2500 years ago, also would have used a kick wheel, just like Eric is using today. And Eric is probably using the same sort of clay, and mixing it with water-just like Jeremiah's potter would have done, to get his pot just the way he wants it.

Now, for those of you who have thrown pots before, or can remember back to your art class school days, you may recall that the first step in working with clay is to knead it. You have to knead it to get all the air bubbles out so it won't shatter in the kiln.

Then, the clay is ready for the potter to throw on the wheel and make it into anything he or she wants-a pot, a dish, a chalice, a vase. The possibilities are so endless, that sometimes a potter may decide to start over. Maybe he doesn't like what he's made. Maybe it's a little misshapen. So the potter can take the same piece of clay and begin working all over again. There is no limit to the number of times a potter can rework a lump of clay. Until the potter is satisfied with his art, he can continue to mold and shape the clay.

But, as I said earlier, sometimes clay just doesn't want to do what you want it to do. Before throwing my pot, I thought that if you want a pot, you make a pot. If you want a vase, you make a vase. But potters will tell you that sometimes they have to wrestle with the clay. And sometimes, when you want to make a bowl, the clay just doesn't want to be a bowl. It just doesn't want to cooperate. When I made my bowl, there was a young woman working next me making a beautiful vase; she had it just right; and then it collapsed before her. So she started again, this time making it into something different than what was originally intended, but still making it into something beautiful.

When Jeremiah goes down to the potter's house, this is exactly what he sees happening. The potter is working away at his wheel. But the clay just doesn't want to cooperate, so he reworks it and makes it into something else that pleases him. This is when God speaks to him, and says, "Can I not do with you, o house of Israel, just as this potter has done?"

Just like the clay in the Potter's hand, so you are in my hand, oh house of Israel." I can shape you and mold you.

Jeremiah sees that Israel is on the wrong track, acting in ways that are evil and unjust, oppressing the poor and forgetting God's commandments. They need to be reshaped and remolded! But they're acting as if they're a marred pot that can't hold its shape. So Jeremiah warns them, "Look, if you don't shape up (no pun intended), God's going to pluck up and break down and destroy you! But to that they say: "It's no use warning us, Jeremiah, of what will happen to us if we don't follow God. Each of us will follow the stubbornness of his or her evil heart."

But here's what Jeremiah knows that the people don't: no human, no matter how stubborn or evil they are, is beyond repair. We may not be as supple and pliable as clay; and we may resist God's hands molding and shaping us into God's desired shape, but God is never through us. We can be repaired. There is always hope. Despite what some people believe, God doesn't stick us in a kiln and declare us done. God is always willing to work with us and knead us and mold us and shape us. God the Potter can do this.

The question is, are we willing to be kneaded, shaped and molded, tough as that may sound? Are we willing to be flexible and responsive?

There is a hymn in our old red hymnal titled "Have Thine Own Way, Lord!" The first verse goes like this: 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." (#302)

That hymn was written in 1907 by a woman named Adelaide Pollard. Pollard believed the Lord wanted her to be a missionary in Africa, but she wasn't able to raise the money to go. In an uncertain state of mind, she attended a prayer meeting, where she heard an elderly woman pray, "It's all right, Lord. It doesn't matter what You bring into our lives, just have Your own way with us." At home that night, Pollard wrote the hymn because she was encouraged and open to the idea that maybe God had something else in mind for her. In other words, she was flexible and responsive to God's will for her, and supple and pliable like clay in the Potter's hands.

Like Adelaide Pollard, are we willing to be kneaded, shaped and molded, tough as that may sound? Are we open to what God is doing in our lives, or are we like the Israelites, crying out that it's too late for us, because we're too stubborn and set in our ways?

Because I truly believe that no matter who we are, what we have done, or where we are in life, God is never done with us. Unlike a pot, we don't get fired and set for life. We may get a little dry and cracked, so to speak, but God the Potter is continually reshaping, reforming, reworking, and redeeming us.

Sometimes we have air bubbles that need to be kneaded out; sometimes our shape needs to be fine-tuned; sometimes, we just don't want to cooperate. But God continues to work with us.

And even if we think we are fired and done, God can still work with us.

Show examples of pots:

Tommy and mug: now I use it for pencils.

Julia's bowl: we use it for things other than cereal.

My bowl: it's misshapen.

Like these pieces of clay, God can always work with us.

God never throws away an old pot.

The Wonderful Cracked Pot

Once there was a man who carried water every day from a stream to his house. He carried it in two large pots hung on each end of a pole slung across his neck. He called them his "wonderful pots."

One pot was perfect. It was always full of water at the end of the long walk from the stream.

The other pot was cracked. It leaked, and always arrived at the house only half full. One day by the stream it spoke to the man.

"I am ashamed of myself," it said.

"Why?" the man asked.

"Water leaks out the crack in my side all the way back to your house," the pot said.

"Because I'm not perfect, you can't bring home two full pots of water. I'm a failure, just a cracked pot."

"You should not feel that way," the man said. "You are not a failure. You are a wonderful pot. And, you can prove it to yourself."

"As we return to the house today, look carefully alongside the path. When we get home, tell me what you saw."

All the way home, the cracked pot paid attention to everything he saw. At home the man asked, "What did you see?"

"Flowers," said the cracked pot. "I saw lots of flowers."

"Yes you did. Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes," said the pot. "But, once again, half the water I was carrying leaked out. I'm sorry."

"There is no need to be sorry," said the man. "Tell me, did you notice where the flowers were growing?"

"Well, yes," he said, a little puzzled. "They were only on my side of the path, but not on the other side. Why is that?"

"For all these years," the man said, "I have planted flower seeds on your side of the path. Every day as we walked back from the stream..."

"Ohhhhhhhh!" the pot interrupted, shaking with excitement. "I watered the seeds through the crack in my side, and the seeds sprouted and the flowers bloomed, and..."

"Yesssss," said the man, who was as excited as the pot. "Because you are the way you are, everyone in the village can decorate their homes with beautiful flowers."

"Each of us is a cracked pot in one way or another," he said. "But there is still no limit to the beauty we can create."

From that day on, the cracked pot knew just how wonderful it really was.

Friends, each of us bears the thumb print of God. God the Potter is gently shaping, molding, and forming us into the likeness of Christ, so that we can be a beautiful vessel of grace in our world.

Amen.

Sources:

ⁱ <http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2010/08/jeremiah-181-12-psalm-139-what-does-it-take-to-shape-a-human.html#sthash.ZWX2rYAv.dpuf>

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