

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 18:1-11
September 8th, 2019
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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 words." 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.

Poor ol' Jeremiah...

He always seems to be on an emotional roller coaster. To be fair, he has a lot to deal with. He is the son of a priest who grew up in a village called Anathoth, on the border between Israel and Judah, just a few miles north of Jerusalem. Solomon had exiled Jeremiah's family from the northern kingdom of Israel and yet Jeremiah is not truly a part of either Israel or Judah.

In the late 7th c. BCE, Jeremiah prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah for 40 years leading to the Babylonian exile. With the Temple newly renovated, religious authorities were working to centralize Jewish worship, clarify the understanding of the one God, YHWH, and return the people to right practices. Even the King, Josiah, was actively purging Assyrian culture from the land as the Assyrian empire faded and the Babylonians were on the rise.

It's was not clear yet who were the villains and who were the heroes, and the people were increasingly distracted by pagan religions, practicing idol worship in the streets of Jerusalem, turning to Babylonian astrology and ignoring the Sabbath.

If that weren't enough, there was a conspiracy afoot to assassinate him. And so, as Jeremiah fights for the survival of his people, he is caught up in a maelstrom of emotions, politics and perspective at a pivotal moment in Jewish history. The prophet is looking for God's guidance through what feels like a

tangle of uncertainty when a word comes to him: “Arise and go down to the potter’s workshop.”

And, at first, the words God gives Jeremiah may just add to his conflict. What is Jeremiah supposed to do with the knowledge, on the one hand, that God might very well uproot and tear down, obliterate and destroy. On the other hand, God seems to be extending the hope of spiritual renewal, the ingathering of exiles and the promise of security.

God has already given the ten tribes of the northern kingdom, Israel, a decree of divorce for their infidelity. And now hopelessness and despair have seized the people of the southern kingdom, Judah. The Judeans are now persuaded that nothing can stop the coming of God’s wrath. God has provided the key to avoiding the pending disaster, but in the line that immediately follows our reading, Jeremiah offers the opinion that the people will only say, “It is no use. We follow our own notions and each will act on the wickedness of their own stubborn heart.”

It’s a sad state of affairs. The people have neglected their covenant with God until they have lost all desire and hope of returning to God’s good, and are now left on their own with only their immediate clans to guide them. No wonder Jeremiah is a little crabby.

And yet...

And yet, there is hope. There is room for repairing the relationship in the words God gave Jeremiah in the potter’s shed. The Creator of all that is turns to an artist who creates with clay so that Jeremiah can experience without filters or prejudice; so that he can apprehend God’s yearning for the people. God leads Jeremiah away from his habitual resources to loosen his grip on what he is sure of, which will allow Jeremiah to take a fresh perspective.

The pattern is not entirely unfamiliar nor is the image. Jeremiah and you and I have pictured God in the book of Genesis, shaping clay into the form of an earthling and breathing life into it. In that same story of creation, we also heard the one time that God said, “It is not good.”

God took more clay and created animals. Then God took material from the earthling, the living clay creature, and reformed it into two humans; a man whose name in Hebrew, Adamah, carries the connection to earth and a woman whose name in Hebrew was Chavah, meaning “to breathe” or “to give life.”

In the potter’s shed, Jeremiah saw that God, our Creator, continues to knead and sculpt and form us. And if we are like clay that has not been dried

or baked into hardness, we can be pliable and responsive to God's creating hands. In that way, God shows Jeremiah, God can re-form the children of God until they have become the vessels they were intended to be.

And then God revisits images from Jeremiah's commission. In the passage we heard two weeks ago, God put words in Jeremiah's mouth and appointed him "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

It seems God wanted to make clear that while willing to work patiently with the people of Judah, God was dealing with clay that was resistant to Divine efforts to reshape them. People willing and loyal to God can and will be taken into God's purposes, but those who remain unpliant must be used for something else.

When a community thwarts God's purposes by choosing to do what is evil or to break their relationship promises to God, they may expect to be uprooted or broken down. And yet, if that community returns to right relationship with God, God will think better of the judgment that might have otherwise become a painful "learning opportunity."

God asked Jeremiah to speak to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, to stir them up to return to God. The people chose to harden themselves instead. Not long after that, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Judah and Jerusalem, taking the royal family, the craftspeople and warriors, the prophet Ezekiel and all but the poorest into exile. A few years later, Babylonians sacked and burned the Temple.

Even so, living outside the Promised Land, without the temple, Jewish exiles developed new and enduring ways of forming community and worshipping God. Many managed not simply to survive but to thrive. And when the exile ended, Jews returned to Jerusalem or stayed in Babylon with larger perspectives on what their covenantal relationship with God meant.

Returning to right relationship *still* leads to restoration.

By revitalizing and living into the unity that God offers, we are remade as communities of God's children; resculpted into new containers of God's presence, both physical and spiritual; reshaped as vessels for offering others experiences of the God who creates us in all our differences and similarities.

We are, if we will allow it, like clay in God's hands. And yet, we are also so much more. God will not make us do anything. God, our Creator, can give us talents and point to what is good. God will not make us use what has been given or force us to pursue what is good. We have the freedom to choose to be in relationship with God. We are free to decide to be open to God's

influence and to choose to serve God's creation with love. Or we can choose to be self-destructive, hateful or petty.

God did not create us to be mindless or heartless. And the shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. God created us to be strong yet supple, and so we can be inspired by study, by art, by nature. And yet, with the naïveté of children, we can also be deformed by abuse, by self-importance, by evil.

We are, by our very nature, susceptible to seduction and corruption, and yet God also created us to be resilient, and capable of remarkable generosity and generativity. Through it all, on our own and in the company of others and in relationship with God, God provides us each with texture and color and capacities for the purpose of conveying our own intentions intermixed with God's loving desire to be in relationship with all people.

Allowing God to shape us in this way is how our lives speak out to all the people we encounter. Walking through a world that seems to be saying, "there is no use," our lives *are* the promise that there is something beyond hopelessness. Our lives are *evidence* that there is a way out of despair and loneliness.

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