

In last week's Bible story, we looked at God's call on Jeremiah and on each of us. Jeremiah received the word the Lord for the first time. He was told that before God shaped him in the womb; God knew him. Though he made his excuses; the prophet Jeremiah chose to obey God. Where we find ourselves in today's biblical story is in a political, social, and religious upheaval. Josiah, the beloved king who upheld Yahweh's covenant with the people, is now dead, and the king who eventually comes to the throne is Jehoiakim, "a self-serving puppet of Egyptian power, who has no intention of continuing Josiah's covenant commitment" (*FOW*, Bruce C. Birch). Here, after some time has passed, Jeremiah receives another word from the Lord. Just as Jeremiah was shaped by God so is all of Judah, if they're willing to be. Today's text offers the image of God as the potter, which is one of the best-known passages in Jeremiah. Jeremiah isn't addressing individuals as much as he is speaking to the community at large. He is speaking to Judah, the last remaining remnant of the people of Israel, which includes Jerusalem. God is looking to shape the entire community of faith "in its collective social, religious, and political life to serve divine purposes" (*FOW*, Sally A. Brown). This passage also reveals one of the most important theological issues in Scripture: "the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Do our actions as human beings really have any effect on what God decides to do" (Birch)? Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the book of Jeremiah 18:1-11. **READ.**

I have a brother who is 13 months younger than I am. One of our babysitters here in Greenville did him a favor when he was young. You see he's named after my dad, "Clarence." He's Clarence the III, as my dad was Jr. and his father Sr. Our

babysitter at the time, advised my parents that he needed a nickname, as “Clarence” was an older person’s name, so she suggested calling him “Clay.” Well, the nickname stuck. Growing up with a brother named Clay, I would tease him, along with others, and call him “Mud.” Of course it was in a loving sisterly way. I don’t think I was ever envious of his name until I realized that his name is a humbling reminder of who and whose we are.

Jeremiah’s artistic imagination in the potter’s house offers us a powerful image of God as a potter. This image of a potter was very tangible in biblical times (just as I hope it is today). Clay was the material of the common folk. Clay was used to make everything from pitchers to pots to washbasins. Clay, as you can imagine, is very versatile and can also be very malleable- shaped and re-shaped in various ways. Imagine, if you will, that you’re at the potter’s house with Jeremiah, and you’re observing the potter at her wheel. She is working on shaping a pot, and it’s slowly taking shape; however, it’s not quite right yet. As you watch the potter take the clay and reshape it in her hands, you notice how skillful and gentle she is at working with the clay. It is often said that any prophet worth her or his salt sees the divine image in everything. In the potter, Jeremiah saw a metaphor for Judah’s relationship with God. God being the divine potter and God’s people, Judah, being the clay. “Jeremiah saw God at work making a people for God’s glory. Persons created in the image of God. God shapes us for God’s eternal purposes and God begins right here. The dust out of which we are made and the image of God into which we are made are one and the same” (*Run With The Horses*, Eugene Peterson). God speaks in that moment to Jeremiah and says,

“Watch this potter. In the same way, I work on you, people of Israel” (v. 6, *The Message*).

Those of you who have attempted or are experts at forming clay may be able to explain this better than I. I tried my hand at making pottery one time so forgive me as I try and explain the process. For those of you who’ve never thrown pottery on a wheel before, here’s what you do. You sit down and take a lump of clay from the bucket beside you (any size piece that you’d like) and you simply begin. There’s a big round plate, the wheel, that looks like it can hold a pizza. Well, that plate spins when you push a pedal on the floor. My goal was simple, or so I thought...create a mug. I grabbed a large amount of clay and slung it onto the wheel. I was more excited about my end product than I was the process...that is until I relaxed into it and let myself get dirty. I sat at the kickwheel- which is the name for the potter's wheel, and I gunned the pedal to the floor. The wheel almost flew off its base. But then I slowly learned the rhythm of the pedal and the wheel but then there was the challenge of the unruly clay in my clumsy hands. I’d apply too much or too little pressure to the clay, and it would collapse. Or I’d add too much or not enough water and disaster ensued. My first twenty or so attempts ended up with the clay back in its original position- in a ball or a misshapen lump on the wheel. The process wasn’t relaxing at all for me. It was frustrating, and it took patience and skill- neither of which I possessed.

Notice that the vessel the potter was working on was “spoiled” or ruined, and then the potter reworked the clay into another vessel. I wonder in awe at how God does it...over and over again?! The challenge for most of us isn’t that God is

an amazing Creator who gives us grace. The challenge lies in the fact that most of us forget who the potter is. Is it us or is it God? In our minds, we think, “Well, of course it’s God.” But then our actions tell a different story as we turn away from God. Yes, God is God and has the authority to do whatever God wishes. Yes, God has divine authority to allow for human freedom, and God gives us the freedom to choose how we will respond to God and to God’s creation. God takes it a step further to say that the behavior of the people can cause God to change God’s mind. In other words, God, the Potter, can do whatever God wishes, even reverse divine decrees, depending on what people do. Therein, lies the tension in this text. Yet, what this passage suggests is some really good news. God’s judgment is not fixed in some deterministic way. God responds to repentance. Just as we respond to the potter’s touch, so God responds to us. “God is determined, out of love for the world, to shape communities whose distinctive ways of worship and life bear witness to the redemptive purposes of God. When they do not, the text tells us, communities can be broken down” (Brown). While God may purpose good for a people, its failure to obey God will result in judgment. God tells Judah to “turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and actions” (v. 11b).

At the potter’s house, God’s call to turn from evil is not only heard, but seen and experienced. Did you notice what the potter does when she has to put the clay back on the wheel? “Does he kick the wheel and go off sulking? Does she throw the clay at the cat and go to the store to purchase another brand of clay? No, neither. The potter simply starts over using the same ball of clay to make a new creation. The potter carefully kneads, presses, pushes and pulls. Patiently. Skillfully. God doesn’t give up. God doesn’t throw away what is spoiled”

(Peterson). However, as the quality of clay can determine what the potter can do with it, so does the quality of choices of a people determine what God will do with them. God says that their behavior will determine their fate as a community- using the same strong verbs God gave to Jeremiah in Chapter 1 (v. 10). If they're headed down the wrong road and being disobedient, they're told that through repentance, God's judgment can be averted. "God can raise out of the ruins of a community a new faithfulness and a new usefulness. Conviction can lead to repentance expressed in action: practicing forgiveness, breaking silence about matters of justice, placing compassion ahead of self-interest" (Brown). The hard truth is that this passage isn't just about God's ability to remold them/us but also God's power to destroy our ways as a community if we do not serve the purposes for which we were created.

It is hard to admit when we have messed up and done something wrong as a community. Why do you think we have a Prayer of Confession each week in worship? It's not just individual sin; it's corporate sin for which we need forgiveness. It is much easier to make excuses or to blame others than it is to repent and ask for forgiveness as a community. Like the Israelites, we, too, can be stubborn. We know we have done wrong and yet our greatest priority can be ourselves. Our communal pride can often hinder us from repenting- from changing our ways. Judah believed they were special because they were the chosen children of God with whom God made a covenant- that they would be God's people and God would be their God. So they thought they could do anything they wanted and still have God's favor. If we're honest, we must confess that there are times when we think the same thing. We anticipate that God will

answer our prayers and forgive our sins. Let me be clear: we may be God's beloved, but we aren't privileged. "Covenant relationship is not an unconditional guarantee for good" (Birch). God pours God's steadfast love into our lives and fills us with the Holy Spirit, empowering us to love one another. And God gives us minds and hearts to make choices. It is up to us how we respond- obediently or disobediently. The amazing grace is that when we're disobedient but choose to repent and return to God's ways, God can change God's mind. But let us also remember that God can change God's mind when we become stubborn just like the Israelites, who choose to follow their own ways in disobedience. Are we, as a people of God, willing to repent and be malleable in God's hands or are we going to follow our own ways and be unmoldable and fixed like pottery already thrown into the kiln, fired, and set in its' dry, rigid, ceramic form? While clay that has not been fired is a material of possibility: moldable, flexible, responsive (Anathea Portier-Young, WP). The only way to change the shape of fired clay is to shatter it, which Jeremiah talks about later. From what do we as a community need repenting?

At the end of the day, "the prophet makes it clear that faithfulness to God, regardless of circumstance, is Judah's (and our) best hope" (*Connections*, Joseph J. Clifford). Repentance is offered and still possible. Like the potter, God's intent isn't to destroy the people but to reshape them in faithfulness, justice, and love. "Metaphors can be pushed too far, but maybe there is a legitimate hint here of the God who becomes clay, that the beloved clay itself might express the potter's own heart and will" (Brown)? **Let us pray.** Change our hearts as a community of faith, O God. Mold us to fight against injustice. Shape us with your love and

courage. Use us to bring about your peaceable kingdom here on earth. Help us to take some risks and to change our ways so that we reflect your love through Jesus Christ in all that we do. You, Lord, are the Potter, and we're the clay. Mold us and make us to do your will. This is what we pray. Change our hearts, O God. May we be like you envision for this world. Amen.