

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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SERMON: THE POTTER AND THE CLAY
TEXT: 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 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.

The Potter And The Clay. It's a nice story. About a potter, one who makes pots out of clay. We make them out of all sorts of material now but back then clay was #1 in the potting world.

We still have potters today though they make more than pots - bowls, cups, plates, art objects, and so on and so forth. Often we picture them working with a big old block of clay on a spinning wheel, sort of like Demi Moore in that old movie, "Ghost" with Patrick Swaise (sp?). A sexy potter! But for the record, I don't think Jeremiah was thinking about a potter who looked like Demi Moore when he wrote our scripture!

As a child I loved to play with clay. It was the cleanest dirt my mother could find so apparently she liked my clay aspirations. I didn't have a potter's wheel though. I make all my art objects by hand. Most of my creations were ash trays. I'm not sure why because no one in my house smoked. Still, I cranked them out with great efficiency. I wouldn't be surprised if somewhere in some overlooked nook of a back closet there might be a little clay ash tray that has never been introduced to ashes.

I loved working with the clay because it was such a creative endeavor. I would grab a block of clay and wonder – “what will this become.” Well, it became an ash tray but it could have become anything. It had potential!

It made me feel a little bit like God, the Creator. Made me think of God making worlds and stars and plants and animals and even people. One of the creation stories tells us that God made Adam out of dirt – and what is clay but a certain kind of dirt with water. I tried making Adam and Eve out of clay but body parts kept falling off. I was never very good at anatomy.

Sometimes I wonder about what God felt when God created the heavens and the earth and everything on it. I wonder if God was filled with joy and pride. I’m not sure that God has human emotions – but when I create I feel joy and pride. I wonder if God felt something like that. God did say about creation, repeatedly, “It is good!” Well, maybe that was a bit of joy or pride in what God accomplished.

We too get to be creative. I’m not just talking about people who are artistic, painters, and sculptors, weavers, and photographers and so many more. I’m talking about you and me – people who every day get up and have the opportunity to create a day.

We have choices about when to get up, what to eat, what will we do, who will we do it with, what will we do for fun, what will we do for society’s sake, what will we do for God, and will we choose not to do and who will we choose to no do things with? We have a multitude of choices that we could make millions of different days out of the same ingredients! So our choices and how we put them together are an act of creativity.

Yes, yes, I know, there are things, like death and taxes, over which we have little control. And yes, yes, I know that if we are not careful our choices can fall into a rut of sameness that becomes dull and deadening. But that is ultimately our choice – a choice that reflects a lack of energy, creativity, and vitality. I’ve been there. I have the t-shirt. I know how easy it is to fall into. But we always have choices to be more, do more, live more, to stay in our rut or get out. Sometimes we even have the choice to help someone get out of a deep rut – or to leave them there and walk on. Choices!

There are some things about our day that are out of our control but so much more that we can be creative with. So what are you going to do with your next day? What are your going to create that will bring you joy and pride?

Back to the clay!

I have to admit that at times when I was creating my fabulous ash trays I ran into problems. The clay just would not do what I told it to do. It was too thin or too thick or fell apart or became too limp to hold a shape.

This frustrated me! I'm not the kind of creator who likes it when his creation is balky. I could be a really cranky godling!

So, when my ash trays didn't turn out to be ash trays...I'd smash them, squash them, and pound on them. And then I' make something else. I'd make....a snake!

Roll em out, curl em up, and flatten their heads into something that looks like a cross between a rattlesnake and a cobra. I never did like snakes but when everything else failed I could make snakes! Then I could look at it, say "It is good," go get some Kool-Aid and Oreos, and call it a day. My juvenile version of the Sabbath.

According to Jeremiah, sometimes God is not completely satisfied with the way creation is working out. I'm not saying that God's workmanship was inferior or that God's design was inadequate. I'm just saying that sometimes clay just won't do what you tell it to do. Sort of like cats. Sort of like people. Sort of like senators and congressmen and presidents. You know what I mean!

But God has the power to remold our lives! And God can make more than snakes!

God can make:

- Happiness
- Health
- Wholeness
- Acceptance
- Hope

Some people say that God can remold our lives just like God is still remolding the mountains, Rockies, Smokies, Alps, Andes, and Himalayas - building them up in places and tearing them down in others, and all virtually unseen and in such small ways so as to be almost undetectable.

Are we comfortable with the idea of God's remolding us? Do you think it conflicts with the Biblical concept of human free will?

If whenever we say “no” to God, God turns us around and remolds us till we say “yes” -- then do we really have any free will, free choice?

A much better theologian than I would take the next hour to attack either the concept of human free will or the concept of God’s intervention into human history. And after an hour, with your head spinning, you still might disagree with his/her conclusions.

I’m going to take a more humble approach. Not so theologically pure. Perhaps more humanly accessible. We’ll see.

So what if God chose to self-limit the way God intervenes in human history, in order to preserve human freedom of choice. What if God chose to only intervene in such ways as:

- Comforting the afflicted and suffering.
- Challenging us to grow in spirit and in community
- And by presenting us opportunities for faith, growth, health, righteousness, justice, mercy, and happiness.

Of course God is free to do whatever God wants to do in and in extraordinary circumstances probably does, even to say to the Prophet Jonah, “You ARE going to preach to the people of Nineveh. Because I said so!” Even in that story Jonah had choices right on down the line – only God made some of Jonah’s choices rather unattractive. Seriously, sometimes our choices are not between good and better, sometimes they are between bad and worse – which is one of the reasons the debt ceiling debate in Washington is so painfully difficult to have.

Well now, imagine a potter whose skilled fingers gently encourage us to grow, to change, to transform into more faithful, more healthy, more caring and merciful people? Would you be upset with God’s smoothing away your more obvious flaws and imperfections? (Maybe if you loved a particular imperfection or addiction!) Or would it be of great comfort to you to know that no matter how badly the clay behaves the potter does not throw it away but “reworks it as seems good to him”?

Now, let’s get back to Jeremiah, shall we?

The potter is at his wheel and God speaks a word of caution, even warning not to any one individual but to the whole people of God. God says, “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."

Such a word could be directed at any nation, state, city, or even church.

God could say, "Texas, I made you pure and you have polluted your lands, waters, and air. But I will remold you in my image."

God could say, "America, I made you full of human and natural resources and now you have squandered them and are nearly broke. But I will remold you in my image."

And God could say, "First Christian, I made you to be a light to the poor, the needy, the abused, and those who have not heard my word but you have focused your efforts internally. But I will remold you in my image."

You know, it is always dangerous to put words in God's mouth. God may not like it. And besides, I must remember, God may already have plans to remold and remake my ministry, in God's image. Yes, there is certainly room for growth! Who knows, maybe that is one of your daily prayers, "Lord, remold our pastor. Please!"

The question is, just how welcoming am I, are we, are you, to the Potter's gentle, transforming touch?