

Wesley United Methodist Church  
September 8, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 18:1-6  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Title: Potter's Wheel: Reworked Not Thrown Away

Have you ever found yourself wishing for a “do-over”; wanting to rewind time and change what you did or take back the words you said, or go back to before something happened? As much as we sometimes may wish for the ability or opportunity to do that, it's never really an option.

But to some extent, today's scripture is about that hope for do-overs.<sup>i</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah, with whom we are journeying for the month of September, lived during a most difficult time for Israel. It was during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and the northern territory of Judah had been invaded by Babylon. Some of the people – particularly artisans, soldiers, and aristocrats – were being deported to Babylonia.

Jeremiah was called and charged by God with proclaiming the message that Israel had turned its back on God and needed to turn around, repent, and change its behavior. Needless to say, his message was not received well by those who had the power to make decisions. The other part of his message was for those who were affected by the decision makers but had no real power of their own. The message to them was that God was with them no matter what was happening.

The image of pottery shows up a lot in Jeremiah's messages and today he has been directed to the potter's house where he watched the potter working at his wheel. He saw the piece the potter was making become spoiled and watched as the potter reworked it into a different piece

that worked better. The message from God was that Israel was like clay in God's hands.

This message can be either comforting or frightening depending upon how you read it and what is going on. The rest of the passage which we didn't read makes it very clear that the clay – or Israel – has a lot of control over what happens. What happens will depend upon whether they do good or evil, whether they listen to God or turn their backs on God. In fact, in the next chapter, Jeremiah will take a piece of pottery and smash it to the ground in front of the priests and elders to demonstrate what will happen to them if they don't change their ways.

I do think that the passage is quite clear that God's preference is for the clay – for Israel – to do what is right in the sight of God. That God's desire is to mold Israel into a vessel that is both beautiful and ready for its intended purpose.

I don't know a lot about working with clay; but I do know that the potter has to use both a firm and a gentle hand. The hand must be firm enough to help keep the clay from spinning off center and collapsing, but also gentle enough to not make holes in it and destroy it.

In Jeremiah's time, pottery was designed to be used for a purpose. There was not as much interest in making a piece beautiful like a work of art. If the piece would not hold water, then the clay needed to be returned to its softer state so that it could be remolded.

We just sang, "Have thine own way, Lord! ... Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still." When we sing words like that, we think of God as the potter.

I said this passage was a one that offered hope for do-overs. When a potter sees that the direction of the clay as it is being shaped is not going to bring out its best qualities, the potter begins to rework it on the wheel. If the clay is continually worked by the potter, it can still be changed and made into the most beautiful version of itself. In this image for Jeremiah, God is frustrated with the people's actions, but God also knows that the true nature of God's people remains and so God keeps faithfully working with what is available.<sup>ii</sup>

An ancient Chinese story tells of a nobleman riding through town. He sees a humble peasant potter at work and stops to admire the pots. When the nobleman asks the potter how he is able to make vessels that possess such convincing beauty, the potter replies, "You are looking at the mere outward shape. What I am forming lies within."<sup>iii</sup>

Our Psalm today tells us that God sees what lies within. Indeed, it says that God formed us – knit us together – in our mother's womb and that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made". Michaela Bruzzese describes it this way, "The Gift of life was given to each of us as God's first act of unconditional love. We each begin purely as gift and as gifted; we are granted the spirit of life at no cost, with nothing owed."<sup>iv</sup> But that initial gift is only the beginning. "We are invited to a deeper, lasting life through a relationship with God."<sup>v</sup>

This deeper lasting life is what develops as God gently works the clay, that is us, into the beautiful amazing work of art that we have the potential to become. But we are not merely passive clay in the hands of God. We are in dialogue with God. Clay can only be worked by the potter when it is soft and pliable, and we have the option of deciding when we are

going to be soft and pliable and when we will resist the guiding hands of the potter.

I read a meditation this week called “Reworking the Clay” that really caught my attention. “She began every morning with a ritual of sorts — the potter woman in the village. She took the cold lump of clay and woke it up, too. Together — potter and clay — they would center themselves, soften themselves so that they were prepared to become whatever the day and the wheel held for them. This preparation — this centering — seemed to invite an openness, an openness to possibility. And so, I watched. Many times, the clay seemed to have a will of its own, resisting the potter’s transformation. It would de-center itself or split from a bubble that was locked inside. But she didn’t discard it, even when her patient work was ruined. She would return somehow to that beginning place, that centering, and begin again.”<sup>vi</sup>

As I read this, I thought about my time of morning devotions – a time when I begin to face the day, awaken to the possibilities that the day will offer, but at the same time begin that awakening with God so that together in a time of devotion we are becoming centered and ready for the new day. Sometimes God gently tries to get my attention and mold me in one direction or another and sometimes I willingly allow that and relish in the love and care that God has for me – and for each one of us. But there are other times when I may be more resistant, or as the meditation says, have a will of my own that resists God’s transformation. I doubt very much that I am unique in that.

There are times when we de-center ourselves or split from a bubble inside – something that we hold on to so tightly that we won’t allow God to help us deal with it. At those times, God doesn’t destroy us, doesn’t give

up on us, doesn't turn away and tell us to make it on our own. God continues to patiently try to rework us into the beautiful creation that God knows we have the potential to be.

I woke up early this morning thinking that for most of us, this image of pottery is not something very familiar to us like it was for those in Jeremiah's day. A more contemporary image for us might be that of the fixer-upper home.

Like me, you may be more familiar with the many HGTV shows that take a house that is in bad shape and turn it into a dream house. It requires seeing the potential that exists amid the less functional kitchen and floor layout – just as God sees the potential in each of us – and reworking it into something amazing.

The designer sees a vision that the potential buyer may have trouble seeing and the end result often has the owner saying something like, "this can't be the same house." God, like the designer, sees the vision of all that we can be – a vision that is often beyond our imagination.

Sometimes the rework can be as simple as cosmetic changes. I often laugh when I hear that because for me cosmetic changes mean new paint and rearranging furniture. For these design experts, cosmetic changes also mean new lighting, counters, backsplashes, and changing the finish on fireplaces.

More often than the so-called simple cosmetic changes, there are structural problems discovered. For me, this is the part that might be analogous to the potter really re-working the piece of clay – almost starting over again. The structural changes often involve things like "suring up" the foundation or installing large beams to support the roof or second floor.

For us, those structural changes may involve how we worship God – whether we come to church because it is a habit or because it is an intentional time of drawing closer to God. It may include times of prayer when we are careful to listen to God and not just present our list of requests.

Putting in beams to make the structure stronger may be part of being intentional about really connecting with other Christians for times of fellowship – but also for times of prayer, reflection, study, as well as times of social action, mission or acts of justice and mercy. It may mean seeing things through the eyes of God so that we see helping someone else not only as what we would do for a friend, but also as Christian action. We might remember that Jesus told us that whatever we do for someone else, we do for him.

Much of the work of the potter is done on the inside making sure that it is smooth. Often there are parts of us that need to be smoothed from the inside; hurts we have carried around, anger, disappointment, resentment, things that need to be smoothed out. The loving hand of the potter or designer God can work within us through our time of worship as we intentionally open ourselves to God. God can work within us through the time we spend in prayer as we seek God's guidance for both the big and small things in life.

I had a friend who would always say "I am holding you in the light". That was his way of saying that he was praying about someone or something. He meant that whatever was going on, he would bring it to God and hold it in God's light. He would pray for it to be illumined by God and pray for God's light to shine in the situation, revealing to him things he might not have seen.

Have you ever found yourself praying about something that made you really angry – the way someone treated you or something he or she said? Have you ever found yourself raging at God about someone else and pleading with God to change that person?

Instead of pleading with God to change someone else, a better way is to hold that person or situation in the light of God. When we do that, we often discover that God's light will show us things we haven't seen. We may start to discover that we are missing something important. Maybe our own behavior has contributed in some way to what has happened. Maybe the other person was going through some things that we didn't know about and it is time for us to be a little more understanding.

When we bring a situation or a person to God in prayer, asking God to change the other person or change the situation, we often discover that we are the one who is changed. Our attitude may change, our approach may change. We are being quietly and gently molded by the loving hands of God. The vision of God the designer is being brought to life. Our inside and even outside may be smoothed out a little bit.

On the altar is a large bowl made by a young woman who was relatively new to pottery. I met her at a craft fair at the church I was serving at the time. Much of her work was beautiful but almost hidden off to the back was this bowl. What I first noticed was how the outside of the bowl was damaged. I don't know enough about pottery to use the correct terms but somehow the outside of the bowl blew out. It looks like chunks might have come off, but however she did it, she put the pieces back together – not in a way that makes it look perfect, but in a way that shows its imperfections.

However, the inside of the bowl is perfectly smooth. From the inside there is no indication of what went on with the outside. I was attracted to this bowl – which she was willing to sell for far less than her more perfect bowls - because the imperfections attracted me. They reminded me of myself and of each of us.

There are imperfections in each of us and sometimes they are pretty obvious in the way we treat others or the scars of life that we bear. But inside the bowl is perfectly smooth and to me that is the hand of God working within us, smoothing the rough edges, helping us to be all that God made us to be.

As the choir sang earlier, let us ask God to take us again to the house of the potter and to mold and make us, shape us, removing every flaw with care, remaking us and filling us up today with all the potential and all the desires of God.

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<sup>i</sup> This concept of “do-over” comes from Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio, “Prophecies and Pottery: Journey with Jeremiah”

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, From Week 1. This story comes from “Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person” by M.C. Richards.

<sup>iv</sup> Bruzzese, Michaela “The Law of Love” in [Preaching the Word](#) Sojourner’s on-line preaching resource.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Shepherd, Glenna T. Third monologue in series from Worship Design Studio.