

Being Clay in the Hands of the Potter

A reflection on the nature and character of God.

Jeremiah 18:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I have some good news and some bad news concerning the **traditional interpretation** of this Old Testament passage from the prophet Jeremiah, with its metaphorical visual image of God as a Potter, and we as the clay.

First, the good news: **Like malleable clay, God can form and reform us into God's image, to be the people God has created us to be.** This leads to the question: How has God (the Divine, the Sacred Presence in our midst: beyond, among, and within you) reshaped your life over the years – your being and doing?

Now the bad news: **If we are unfaithful and do not behave according to the ways of God, then we are cursed and God will simply smash us down and try to remake us.** This leads to an even more serious question: Is your understanding of the nature and character of God one that leads to the conclusion that we get what we deserve? Those claiming the identity of "Bible believing" Christians and congregations must come to this conclusion – after all, it's right there in the Bible.

However, **if our primary understanding of the nature and character of God is love, grace, forgiveness, acceptance, and compassion, then there's something wrong with this biblical picture.** This is a primary reason why so many now identify themselves as "progressive" Christians, including myself.

Most theologians have recognized this disconnect and have concluded that an overarching understanding of God found in the book of Deuteronomy, and that of the prophets, leads to the conclusion that all the ills and devastation that the Israelites faced were the result of God's divine will – God's punishment for their disobedience, their breaking of the covenant. There's even a scholarly name for this perspective: **Deuteronomistic theology, or covenant theology. This involves a theological understanding of divine rewards for obedience, and punishment for disobedience.** It is thought to have been derived by trying to understand the destruction that occurred first in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and then later (during the time of Jeremiah) in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, with the Babylonian destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and what is known as **the Exile**. They were trying to answer the questions:

- How did we get here?
- How could this happen to us, the people of God?
- What did we do to deserve this?

In all honesty, many (often including ourselves) still ask these same questions when tragedy and hardship befall them. That's a reflection of the theological perspective that claims **everything that happens in life happens for a reason, that it's simply a part of God's will.** That's something I, and many if not most of you, used to hold as gospel truth. However, **that's not the gospel message of grace.**

Holding this in mind, let's return to the metaphor used in this passage from Jeremiah. The prophet used the comparison of something relatively well-known to help explain something else that was otherwise unrelated. While helpful and creative, there's something very important about metaphors that we need to remember. **At one in the same time, a metaphor can be insightful and revealing, yet also be problematic and misleading if taken too far, and especially when literalized.** Of all the many Old Testament metaphors used to speak about God, the most common are predominately masculine, hierarchical, and even militaristic. God is *like* a Father, a King, a Warrior. Perhaps more favorable to many, God is like a Shepherd, yet still often thought of in male terms. And then there's this image of **God as a Potter.** This metaphor is used to illustrate **how God relates to and interacts with creation itself.**

This theistic metaphor, along with others, pictures God as continuously creating and making new beginnings, opening up new possibilities, and initiating new events. This is the primary witness that the scriptures give to the kind of God we have. Therefore, if we have a God who indeed continues to interact with what God has created, the question becomes: How? The prophet Jeremiah uses the metaphor in the following specific way: as clay in the potter's hands yield to the will of the potter, so God shapes the nation Israel to God's liking. This is a rather strong and straightforward assertion of the **sovereignty of God** – God's supreme power and authority.

So, how can we apply this metaphor to us today? While some won't want to, let's go back to the good news. **As clay in the hands of the divine Potter, we are continually being worked, molded, shaped, and stretched by hands both outside our existence and from within by the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit.** Yet, Jeremiah's observation that suggests that we are like clay doesn't mean that we are likened to some shapeless lump, entirely at the mercy of the artist's hand. Biblical commentator Dennis Bratcher offers the following necessary warning, "Often readers stop here with this image, and conclude by analogy that humanity is only passive clay in the potter's hands, powerless to affect the design of the potter and helpless to alter the outcome." However, when we look closely at this passage from Jeremiah, we learn that **contrary to a metaphor of the potter and passive clay (where all things are predetermined by the potter), the prophet indicates that the clay itself plays an active role in what is created.**

God has created us in such a way that we have free will and freedom of choice. We share, therefore, in how we are shaped. And, of course, both nature and nurture, our genetics and our environment, play a big role in that determination. As clay, then, whether we are gritty or smooth, malleable or stiff, refined or flecked with imperfections, it all affects how we will turn out. So perhaps the biggest question is this:

- Are you and I willing to trust that God, with all our flecks, flaws, and failures, even our sins, can make something of beauty out of you and me, out of our community of faith?

The issue in the Book of Jeremiah, then, is whether Israel will become what God intends, or whether they will choose to reject God's intentions. There is always a choice. We, as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, even as a nation, are always faced with the same options. **Central to the very core of the theological doctrine of creation is the belief that God does respond and interact with that creation, including with human beings.** While I realize that isn't necessarily the understanding of all in this congregation, most of us do believe that **our human decisions matter**, especially as they relate to allowing God's intentions and purposes to work out in the world, including in and through us. We also understand that **our decisions come with consequences, either good or bad. That's not to say those consequence are "caused" or even "allowed" by God.** Also, we know that events may *not* go as God intends – we call that tragedy, or in other instances **evil**. Or, people may respond contrary to God's purposes – we call that **sin**.

So yes, to fulfill God's intentions for us, and to live into what it fully means to be a child of God, **we may need to change some of our attitudes and actions, a change of heart and mind.** The theological word for this is **"repentance."** It lies at the heart of Jeremiah's message – and the message of all the biblical prophets for that matter, including Jesus.

The theological struggle and tension remains between God's sovereignty on the one hand, and human free will on the other. **The metaphorical analogy of God as a potter and humans as clay affirms a world in which God is active in all aspects of human life and history, not controlling or manipulating to make sure the plan comes out right, but working dynamically to accomplish God's intentions and purposes for God's creation. That includes are for the environment and all of God's creatures.** This is incorporated into the often-repeated statement, one used by Martin Luther King, Jr., though not originating with him, **"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."**

This leads to one more aspect of the metaphor of the potter and clay that I want to quickly address. **Clay is workable only until it is fired or dries out. After that it can no longer be shaped as the potter desires. God can mold and shape us only if we remain open to being molded, shaped, and re-shaped.** We Presbyterians have a mantra for that, **"reformed and always reforming"**. Once anyone, or any organization, including the church, becomes hard-hearted, unwilling to bend, yield, or change in any way, in other words becoming an absolutist or fundamentalist, or those who have made **an idol out of tradition and heritage**, it's hard to live into God's true intentions for humanity. Let us leave today with the following question in our hearts, minds, and spirits:

- Will you and I, will we together, allow God to reshape, rework, and reform us to more fully be fashioned into God's intentions for us – **to love, to forgive, to extend hospitality, to be compassionate, to work for justice, to right the wrongs perpetrated by church and society?**

For us as Christians, these intentions are living life according to the ways and teachings of Jesus. Another biblical commentator summarizes it with this wonderful point. "It can happen, if we allow the Potter to do the one, single most important part of creating a work of beauty: **centering the clay on the wheel.** If the clay is not centered, the centrifugal forces will cause the clay to [fly off] and splatter into a huge mess. **Trusting God is to allow ourselves to be centered in the will of God, allowing God**

to take the raw material we give God and slowly but inexorably fashion it into a vessel of both usefulness and beauty."

May the Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on us, to melt, mold, fill, and use us in helping that long arc of the moral universe bend toward justice.

Amen.

Resources:

Guthrie, Shirley C., *Christian Doctrine*, Westminster/John Knox Press; Revised, 1994.

Bratcher, Dennis, *14th Sunday After Pentecost, September 5, 2004*, Christian Resource Institute.