

I Am the Potter, You Are the Clay
Sermon on Jeremiah 19:1-8
Pastor Julie McCain, Oct. 29, 2017

Please pray with me. Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear. Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your grace deep in our hearts. Amen.

As we walk with the prophet Jeremiah to a potter's house Jeremiah's in a very specific frame of mind. He's basically spent the last 18 chapters pleading with God's people to change, to come back to God and he's not feeling too hopeful about the whole situation!

Just one chapter earlier, he puts it this way: The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen; with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts.

- Those are some pretty strong words!
- And it all means that he isn't having much success in getting the people to change.

God's been trying to encourage Jeremiah, but Jeremiah's had some trouble hearing it. So God decides to show him.

Once at the potter's house, Jeremiah finds the potter working away on his potter's wheel.

- But the project he was working on wasn't going very well at all.
- In fact, the vessel he was making of clay had spoiled right in the potter's hand.

For a number of years as a child I took pottery lessons.

- And you learn right away that your projects may not work the way you had hoped the first time around.
- Too much pressure as the pot is spinning away, and you might end up lopping the top off, and too little pressure and it doesn't work very well at all.

But clay as an art form is fundamentally forgiving. Make a mistake on the wheel, and you can take it off, add some water, and start again. And as far as I know, you can keep doing that as many times as you like until you have the piece of pottery in front of you that you want.

So it is with the potter in our story, who when the clay spoiled in his hands did not throw it away. In the story he doesn't even stop to consider the fact that what he was making isn't working anymore. Instead, the sentence keeps right on going, and so too does the potter, reworking it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

→Perhaps, like Jeremiah, we spend more energy worrying about the spoiled clay than our potter ever does.

For when God sees that things aren't working so well for us, he doesn't throw up his hands and sell the potter's wheel. He does not give up on us! Instead he gets right to work on us.

→So if you feel like you're not coming together as the beautiful pot you should, don't despair. God isn't finished with you just yet.

And then, after Jeremiah has seen the potter's dedication to his work, the word of the Lord comes to him: "Can I not do with you, just as the potter has done? Just like clay in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand.

We would all do well to spend a little more time recognizing that we are but clay in our master potter's hands. That we are in need of someone far wiser than us to shape us into what we need to be.

And on this Reformation Day, we can also think of the church that way—in need of being re-shaped, even today. Of course Martin Luther re-formed the church 500 years ago, but he also taught us of our need to always be re-formed, re-centered around Christ and his word, for we are just clay in his hands, here for his purposes.

What Martin Luther learned, as he read and re-read the Bible and finally came to understand God's grace, is that the Bible is alive.

- It doesn't matter if we've read it many times over and know all the stories.
- You read them again, and they come alive and God's Spirit speaks to you with fresh words. Reading the Bible is like opening a window to let the wind of the Holy Spirit in.

And yet it can be a challenging to let ourselves be shaped, to give up control.

- That was really the problem that Martin Luther encountered so many years ago, and a problem we could easily enough encounter in our churches again today.
- The church was built with the best of intentions and focused on Christ, but then the church spent much of its energy trying to sustain what they had built.

It's really quite understandable, because it's uncomfortable to be clay in someone else's hands. It means that we don't have control over where we are headed or what we will become.

- It's far easier to hunker down than it is to be open to change.
- How easy it is, too, to fall into a rut in our lives of faith, in which we just keep doing what we've always been doing, not paying much attention to the ways we might need to be reworked.

And yet recall Jesus' prayer just before he was betrayed: "Father, not my will but yours."

Or, the line in the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come and your will be done," and Martin Luther asks us to imagine that we are not just asking for that to happen in a nebulous, general way, but rather that we are praying: Your kingdom come and your will be done, and may it happen in and through US.

And God promises that it will happen! if only we trust that we are like clay in his hands, ever being reshaped.

Part of Jeremiah's problem may have been that he imagined HIMSELF as the potter, which is far too much responsibility for any person to bear.

- We can have the same problem, too, imagining ourselves as both the potter and the clay, with control over the whole process. But that's not what the story says.
- The story also doesn't say that we are like pots that God has made. Because pots have already gone through the kiln; they can't be changed at all.

And it is natural that we should prefer being pots to being clay.

- Think about what it's like to be poked and prodded, refashioned into something new.

- Never mind the fact that as clay is being reshaped, it loses its old shape. And while clay might not mind that too much, as people, we tend to resist it. We don't like losing what's familiar.

Don't get me wrong, the end result IS wonderful, for it's God doing the creating.

- But the process, the process is hard.
- So if you feel some spiritual growing pains these days—if you feel like God might be working away on your heart, don't despair! Rather, keep your eyes on the horizon, on the bigger picture of what God promises here:

Can I not do with you as the potter has done? Like clay in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand.

And for that, we give thanks. Because it means that, come what may, we are all in God's hands. Amen.