

"With Mud on God's Hands"
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24
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The last time I remember preaching on this passage from Jeremiah,
the congregation wasn't paying much attention to me.

In fact, they were downright distracted.

Because situated on the chancel, right next to the Communion table,
was a *potter*, at work at his wheel.

The potter had taken his place there, right at the point when this reading from Jeremiah 18 was beginning.

So by time the sermon was underway, the potter had already produced a glistening mound of clay,

and was alternately *centering* it on the wheel and moistening the outer surface as it turned.

As I offered my less attention-getting reflections on Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house, a vessel of sorts was beginning to take shape.

You could *feel* the anticipation of the congregation as they strained forward in the pews,
witnessing this act of creation taking place before their very eyes.

And without my knowing it was going to happen, our potter timed it so that just as I was reflecting on how the potter in Jeremiah

had become dissatisfied with what he was making and had broken it down to start over,

our potter did the very same thing!

You could hear a collective *gasp* as people witnessed what had just happened.

Which is not surprising, if you think of it, because those people had already become *invested* in this new creation,

with each of them having their own hopes or expectations as to whether this lump of clay

might become, say, a *bowl*, or perhaps a *pot*, or maybe a *Communion chalice*.

Kind of like watching a child grow up, being shaped by various forces in her life,

and wondering what sort of person she would become.

Or perhaps like witnessing events in London or Washington this week, and wondering whether a great nation

is being *reshaped* before our eyes.

And maybe it was just my imagination, but I was pretty sure

those gasps that one could hear were gasps both of *dismay*, and of *delight*.

Which sounded just about right to my ears.

Because I felt I knew that congregation well enough,

to know there were some who saw the breaking down and reshaping of the pot

as a sign of *doom* (for ancient Israel or perhaps for themselves, by extension).

While there were others who perceived, even in that expression of judgment,

that something *mysterious-but-wonderful* was happening.

Now, It goes without saying, that such responses hinge on your perception of how God is at work in the world.

Is the Holy One more of a punisher, or a builder? A heavy-handed manipulator,

or perhaps a more subtle influencer of events?

Is this story all about judgment, or more about how we respond to *change* at the potter's hands?

And there may no piece of scripture that has influenced our view of that question more than today's *first* reading, from Ps 139.

“Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”

“Wherever I might flee from your presence, you are there.”

“When I was being made in secret, your eyes beheld my unformed substance.”

And then, how about *this* one: “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed.”

Phew! Anyone need a little breathing room?

Now, the thing that Psalm 139 has in common with Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house is that each of them evokes that eternal question:

How much choice do we have in what we become, or how much does that lie beyond our control?

Philosophers call it ‘free will versus determinism’; theologians refer to it as ‘human choice versus predestination’.

But even many folks who think of predestination as some crazy doctrine that only old-school Presbyterians believe in,

seem nonetheless convinced that God has every event of their lives all mapped out in advance.

I remind you of that dumb old story about the Baptist and the Presbyterian coming out of a meeting.

The Presbyterian trips and falls down a flight of steps. And after rushing to his rescue

and determining that he has only a few bumps and bruises,

the Baptist quips, “Well, I bet you’re glad to have that one behind you now!”

Now, all of that doctrinal stuff can seem very abstract and mind-numbing; but I want to invite you to look more closely at these two passages.

Could it be that there is *some other* factor at play here? Something beyond these head-in-the-clouds debates

about matters that appear to have no resolution?

Well, look no further than these middle verses of Psalm 139.

“You *knit me together* in my mother’s womb”;

“My frame ... was intricately woven.”

And the psalmist’s response is, first, to express *gratitude*:

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

And second, to place his or her life in God’s hands, by concluding: “Search me, O God, and know my heart;

see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Sure, like you and me, the psalmist would prefer for not even *God* to know our hearts so well.

But even when we are judged by God, God’s *grace* bridges the gap between judgment and a *loving acceptance that will not let us flee or hide*.

But if Psalm 139 gently *hints* at God’s grace, Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house *shows it in action*, in the interplay of potter and clay.

Because even though the passage ends with God declaring judgment against ancient Israel, there is never even a *hint*

that the Great Potter is abandoning this project that she had begun.

In fact, this revelation to Jeremiah even declares that the Great Potter’s mind is *changeable*,

according to how well the clay responds to that intricate interplay between its own qualities and the fingers of the potter.

You see, it’s all right there in something that Jeremiah implies but *doesn’t* quite spell out, concerning the potter and the clay.

It’s something I learned on that Sunday years ago--as did those who were sitting in pews near enough to see the potter close up.

What we saw, was that by time the potter finished his creation,

not only was the original mound of clay reshaped into a chalice,

but the potter himself was *drenched* in sweat, his hair, face, and upper body *spattered* with clay,

and looking for all the world as if he had just run several miles!

So I guess you could say that what Jeremiah saw in the potter's hands that day

was not just the near-term future of Israel in the sixth century BCE.

It was also a foreshadowing of such involvement, such *passion* on God's part, that God would later come and dwell among us, and even suffer crucifixion

in order that our human vessel could be redeemed.

Friends, the positive message of both Psalm 139 and Jeremiah is that God *stays* with the process, creating and recreating,

regardless of what a spoiled product we may appear to be. (Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman and Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* [1994, Year C, After Pentecost 2, p. 23])

And that is good news, as much so now as in the 6th century BCE.

But there is something else that I have learned from interaction with potters and pottery over the years.

First, there are those potters who function more as *artists*. They may be skilled in the fundamentals,

but their *passion* is to create singularly unique pieces.

They may or may not use a wheel. And they begin each piece not with a particular design in mind,

or sometimes not even knowing whether it will be a pot or a cup or a bowl.

Rather, they *delight* in working with the character of that particular piece of clay,

to discover what emerges, from what can only be called a *shared act of creation*.

Yes, I know that beloved old hymn, "Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay."

It is a lovely sentiment, and it may well be drawn from some biblical imagery.

But it is *not* the divine potter of Jeremiah 18—who, if you listen carefully, is at some points pinching and molding,

but, at other points, pausing to discern how Israel responds, before moving forward.

It's enough to make you wonder

whether Jeremiah's concern is really with returning Israel to some imagined time when things were better;

or if God is always the potter creating the *future*,

then are Israel's imperfections rooted less in rebellion,

and more in *resistance to change*?

And then another observation about potters.

While some function as artists, others of them operate more as *skilled craftspersons*.

Their passion is to produce a reliable line of vases or pots or mugs that people want to buy.

When Dana and I were getting married, a close friend from college was apprenticed to one of America's most famous potters.

He was not a mass producer; but he had developed a distinctive style of dinnerware and related items—

casserole vessels, serving dishes, mixing bowls, all with his trademark patterns and glazes.

And these were in great demand among those pottery lovers who wanted that distinctive Byron Temple look.

So rather than have a china pattern registered somewhere for wedding gifts, we were able through our friend, the apprentice

to register one particular pattern of *pottery* place settings from this guy—

ones that the Brooklyn Museum had featured in a special display of his work.

And what resulted is something that we consider to be the most valuable thing in our home. Fifty years later,

I still delight in looking at them, touching them, using them.

But what makes them so pleasing is not the reliable uniformity that one would get in a china place setting,

or even in mass-produced pottery.

Rather, it is that each of the dinner plates, for example, is unique in its pattern of colors,

and vary from each other up to half-an-inch in diameter.

Yet there is no question that they belong together as a set. And in our last church, there was a woman who really knew pottery,

who instantly recognized our dinnerware as the work of that particular potter.

But thanks to Jeremiah, part of the pleasure that I get from our pottery is in how it reminds me that the Great Potter of Israel

is apparently not interested in uniformity, or in our human ideas of perfection.

The potter works with the unique makeup of our individual clays, and the singular ways that you or I or a great nation may respond

to the pinching or glazing or firing.

And yet, though we are each originals, the practiced eye can see the hand of the same Potter.

A potter maybe not achieving what was originally intended, but *celebrating* what we have become.

Please pray with me:

Yes, Lord, make us and mold us. But remind us that you do not demand your own way. Help us work with you to become functional-but-unique vessels, suited for whatever purpose emerges. Amen