*“IT’S NO USE”*

Jeremiah 18:1-12

March 14, 2021

Jeremiah had a clerk, a scribe, to take down his prophesy. God would deliver Jeremiah the Word, and he’d dictate it to this fellow, Baruch. Well, a Michael Williams, minister and storyteller, developed a story around Baruch’s possible memory of our particular story here this morning.

“One morning I arrived at work to find the prophet dressed as if to leave for a journey. I asked him where he was going, and how long he would be away. ‘Not long, my friend.’ He replied, looking at me with that intense gaze of his. You know, I never was quite sure whether he was looking at me or through me. ‘We are going to a place God has shown me. A place where the future of this people of ours will be revealed. We are going to the potter’s house, and we will observe the artist at work in expectation of seeing God’s hand there as well. Come along.’

“So I gathered up my instruments and followed. The prophet always walked with an urgency that made him difficult to deep up with. It seemed to me as if he were hurling himself headlong into God’s future, never really knowing for sure what he would encounter there. Perhaps he trusted the One who called him into that future and this trust drove away all fear. Or perhaps he simply had little regard for his own well-being. I never could tell, and speaking truthfully, it always made me more than a little nervous.

“In spite of my natural concern for my own well-being, I followed. I could see no harm that could come to us in the house of a potter. The prophet entered without knocking, which was his usual practice when in this state of urgency. The potter looked a bit startled at first, but soon asked us to sit. He worked with only clay and a bit of water as his materials. His hands and the wheel were his tools. We observed as he took a lump of this clay, and as it turned on the wheel he slowly worked it until it began to take shape, having a shallow bowl-shaped recess at its center. Then wetting his hand again he placed his fingers on the outside of the bowl, and his thumbs on the inside. Almost as if by magic he raised the sides of the bowl up away from the wheel. Just then as the sides were rising, the bowl went lopsided, one part leaning akimbo away from the rest. As it turned on the wheel it put me in mind of someone limping, dipping more to one side than to the other as he walks.

“This course of events didn’t seem to disturb the potter greatly. He simply stopped the wheel and pounded the clay back into a lump, then began turning the wheel again. He proceeded through the same process as before, and a second time something went amiss. This time one side of the pot was noticeably thicker than the other. A second time the potter beat on the clay until it was a lumpish mass. ‘How many times will you have to rework the pot before you decide it’s hopeless and throw it away?’ I inquired.

“ ‘In the first place you didn’t see the first three times I tried to raise a pot from this particular lump before you came in. And as for throwing it away, I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing. Good clay is not a thing to waste. I’ll just keep working with it until I discover the vessel that is hidden inside. If I keep at it that vessel will emerge sooner or later. You don’t waste good clay. Remember that, young man.’

“Finally, following several additional attempts the potter raised a fine looking piece. I noted that this final pot was very different from the first I had seen him try, as if there was some form there living inside that lump of clay just waiting to be discovered by the hands of a skillful artist.

“ ‘I have seen what I came to see,’ the prophet blurted out and with an abrupt farewell rose to leave. I thanked the potter for his time and followed.

“When we arrived back at the prophet’s house he went into the cool darkness of his room and left me to wait on the Word of the Lord that would come to him, and that he would then instruct me to write.

“Finally, late in the afternoon, the prophet emerged and said to write this: ‘I am the potter and you are the clay, O Israel. Can I not treat you like the potter does the clay when the pot turns out all wrong? Do you think I will not pound you down into a lump again and again if you continue to defy me? I can raise up nations like pots and I can beat them down again. You know this is no boast. You know from your own history that what I say is true.

“ ‘But if a nation turns back to me, I will remember what a beautiful pot is hidden within the cloak of its sinfulness.

“ ‘Now go to my people and tell them that they must turn back from the evil they do one another. Tell them they must learn again to be the vessel I intended them to be from the first. If they do this I will work with them and raise them up. But if they think things are past hope, that they cannot rely on me but turn back to their evil devices, then I will pound them into a mass of clay that has no recognizable shape and is nothing more than a lump. Tell them this, O prophet.’ The prophet fell exhausted on the floor. I lifted him up and put him on his pallet to sleep.”

Other scriptures invite us to imagine God as ruler and judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father, mother, and lover. Jeremiah 18 invites us to see God as an artisan and artist.

Now, in Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once for all. To this day, God tells Jeremiah, God’s people are like clay that has not yet been fired. As we, too, go down to the potter’s house, we may learn the difference between clay that has been fired, and clay that has not yet been fired.

It is this: clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape. It may be decorative, but is often functional, and is most often designed for a single purpose – a brick or tile, bowl or plate, a mug, a vase, a lamp, or a storage jar. It is easy to break. Such clay, now dry ceramic, is often lovely and as often useful. It is specialized. It is also rigid and brittle.

Clay that has not been fired is malleable. It may be shaped and reshaped infinitely. It is a material of possibility: moldable, flexible, responsive.

Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils, God did not fire the clay from which she made us. No one of us is only a tile, a pitcher, or a lamp. God is able to shape us and reshape us, and God labors tirelessly at the wheel on our behalf. God assesses our character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.

After Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s workshop, and after God explains to Jeremiah just how God is a potter and just how God’s people are like clay in God’s hand, whom God is able to re-form, God reveals God’s intentions to Jeremiah.

God’s plans for a nation, or for individuals, God explains, are not fixed, and they are not determined apart from our own choices. On one hand, God’s good plan to build up a people may be thwarted by their choice to do what is evil. On the other hand, God may plan to pull down a kingdom that has made itself great on the backs of the oppressed.

But if that nation turns from its evil, God may change her mind concerning the destruction God had planned. Just as you and I, the unfired clay, respond to the potter’s touch, to water and to the wheel, so God responds to us. That’s fascinating! It’s kind of mind-blowing. It’s so full of possibility, right? Just as we respond to the potter’s touch, so God responds to us.

People, the shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. We remain supple. We, as individuals, and as communities, may be formed through the practice of virtue. We may also be deformed through abuse and ambition. We are susceptible to influence, suggestion, temptation, and corruption.

Yet we are also resilient, and capable of astonishing goodness and true conversion. Through it all, even in the company of others, and even in relationship with God, each of us forms our own intentions and exercises our own free will. And that effects how Yahweh, God, the Lord, behaves towards us.

Verse 11 urges us to “return, every one from their evil ways, and amend your ways and your doings.” So what might you or I like to be reworked into? Well, our first clue is the Great Commandment of Matthew 22: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. Then Jesus says there is a second, like it. Well actually, we love our God *`* “loving our neighbors as ourselves,” don’t we?

So, first, if we are to be in the Master’s hands, we have to be mindful of the marginalized. We have to take notice of those less fortunate than ourselves. Do our thoughts resemble the thoughts of Christ when we think of the marginalized?

But being mindful alone is not enough. Many people have good thoughts. So, secondly, we must be motivated by the mandates of the Master. And not just the ‘thou shalt nots,’ but the ‘thou shalts’ as well. “Love your enemies; do good to those who misuse you.” “Bear one another’s burdens.”

And thirdly, if we are in the hands of the master, we will be moved to make a meaningful difference. Like the Master, we just have to be compassionate. We can*not* see need and ignore it. If we are in the Master’s hands, we will be compelled by compassion.

It’s tough, right? Mindful of the marginalized, and motivated to do something that makes a difference, a difference of compassion.

Baruch had a finishing thought:

“I knew that tomorrow the prophet would be proclaiming in the streets what he had just dictated to me. I knew as well, that the people would receive such words – if at all – as excuses for their hopelessness.

As I walked home, I began to wonder if there was something missing from the prophet’s message. Hadn’t the potter said after all, that you don’t waste good clay?”

Amen.