

Unfired

September 4, 2016 Jeremiah 18:1-11

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One of my most prized possessions is a clay pot that a retired priest made for me. In fact, it is so prized, that I decided not to bring it to show you all, because, well, you know....it's so prized. What if I dropped it? Or left it here? Or it got chipped in transport? As much as I would love to share it all with you, well quite frankly, it just wasn't worth the risk. It is irreplaceable in my heart. There is a funny little card that he included, and I keep it inside the pot. His name and the date are scratched into the bottom of it. To think that he would care enough about me to spend his precious time throwing this pot just for me....well it is overwhelming and unexpected.

You see, I loved this pastor so very much. I learned so much from him. In fact, I don't know if I would be standing here today with all of you if he hadn't crossed my path. He was the one who first sent me into ministry training. He was the one that asked me to play Jesus for him in the second grade play when he got sick. He gave me my first feminist theological book. He was deeply spiritual, as well as stunningly brilliant. He fought, literally, for civil rights in the 60s. Would wait hours in line when the Dalai Lama came to town. I admired him so so much. And to think, he made this pot for ME....he who was my teacher, made the pot for me!

The Lord sent Jeremiah to the potter's house for a few lessons of his own. Apparently it was necessary to get Jeremiah out of his study for him to really hear God's word. I venture the same is true for us as well. Seems God was also ahead of our modern age of multiple intelligences and teaching to learning skills, sending Jeremiah to the potter's house for a visual lesson this time, for a chance to take in God's message at another level, in a manner that might make the point more understandable if not at least more dramatic. God let Jeremiah watch the lesson for a while before interrupting with actual words.

What did Jeremiah see? Well he watched as the potter turned his wheel and worked his clay. The clay took shape under his hands and with the spinning of the wheel. But eventually the vessel no longer matched the potter's dreams and desires. It was not taking the shape and form the potter intended any longer. And so he simply reworked the vessel. He took the clay that had been formed into shape and reshaped it. He scraped it off the base of the wheel, he mashed it together with both his hands. He set it back on the base and using wet hands, began again to shape and mold the clay into the pot of his new dreams, until it seemed good to him, the potter.

Then God spoke. What do you think, Jeremiah? Can't I do the same with you? Can't I reshape you and remold you and basically start anew with you too, just like this potter and his clay? In fact, Jeremiah, aren't you actually the clay, my clay? Aren't I the potter that creates you and can recreate you? Aren't I the creator? Hmmm, the creator. The one who took clay from the ground and molded it an shaped it into that first human being way back in the story of Genesis.

It seems that God creates us, molds us, but doesn't fire us in the kiln. Why? Because fired clay is rigid. It breaks easily. I won't bring my prized pot because it is indeed fired....beautifully fired. But with that firing comes the risk of breakage, the chance of chipping. But more than that, a fired piece of clay has been cast for one and only one purpose. It is a cup or a bowl or a pitcher or a candlestick or a plate. Once fired, a piece of clay takes on an intentionality. And while the intention for that fired clay may be wonderful, it cannot be reworked, recast, reshaped, remolded. A cup is stuck being a cup.

But clay that is left unfired can be continually reformed. God did not shape us once and for all, but for continued transformation. God leaves us as malleable clay so that we remain responsive; to God, to the world. The form that we originally take is not the final form. Our original purposes are not our only purposes.

If you were paying attention to the reading this morning, you may have picked up that God is not really talking to Jeremiah about Jeremiah. No. While it is true that as individuals we remain the clay in God's artistic hands, the lesson here is for community. "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel, o St. Luke community." God's lesson here, God's instructions, are for the nation, for the community of Israel. God shapes communities toward God's purposes just as surely as God shapes individuals.

So what does that mean for us at St. Luke? How has God shaped us in the past and how is God looking to rework us now? These are questions of certitude; meaning as surely as God set St. Luke down in Downers Grove 54 years ago, God is always about reworking and remolding us. The question is not 'IS God trying to reform us?' but rather, 'HOW is God working on us? How can we be responsive clay in God's molding hands?' These are not questions we human beings like to ask. In fact, most of us would prefer to be turned on the potter's wheel, and then fired for good, once and for all. Most of us human beings would prefer to know our purpose up front, thank you very much. If I'm a cup now, I want to be a cup for the rest of my life. We aren't too into the idea of change as human beings. The thought of starting out as a cup, and then being turned into a platter, and then after that a pitcher, and then after that, who knows.....well that can be down right frightening to us. But our lesson today says its God's choice about all of this. Our lesson today tells us this is how God has designed our relationship with the Divine. And the Divine is the potter; we are merely the clay. And to be a faithful community of God's our job is to submit to this molding and reshaping. We are not to resist the hands of the Divine potter as we are twisted and pulled into new shapes that suit God's current dreams. No we are to be responsive and yielding.

So how are we being reshaped right now? Well, some of that is hard to see. After all, while clay is being turned on the wheel, it can be very hard to foresee the finished product. If you've never watched a potter throw clay, watch a video and try to guess at the beginning what that lump of clay is going to turn into! And by the way, 'to throw' clay does not mean 'throw' as in 'toss' or 'hurl'. This throw comes from the old English that meant to twist or turn, which refers to the old way in which pots and vessels were made. The point remains, how a piece of clay will end up is anyone's guess; sometimes even the potter's!

But we have glimpses of how we are being reshaped. In March, Delta unveiled plans for renovations for the older parts of our facility. These plans will help us meet our mission needs better, pass on the faith to new generations and ensure we are good stewards of our building, maintaining and improving it as needed. That reshaping is a pretty physical and visible working of us as clay! But we also feel the pulls and strains of the changing culture around us. How do we bring Christ to those outside our doors when few folks simply walk into churches any longer? How do we pass on the faith to the next generations when Sunday mornings are no longer respected as church-time, but instead are filled with sports? How do we hear where God is calling us to love and serve our neighbor when we don't really know our neighbors any longer? How do we know if we are having an impact in ways that count, besides counting numbers?

These are all questions we need to respond to now as life swirls and changes around us. The good news is that we are in God's hands; God's strong, artistic, loving, caring hands that mold us and reshape us as

needed to meet God's dreams and desires. And therein lies one of the challenges; we must truly believe that we are the created, that we ARE the clay, that God does know better and know best. When we live in those spaces, we can trust the unknown, we can surrender and yield to the changes we must make, we can let go of our clinging to the way we've always done things, to the way WE like things, to the way WE wish things were.

Fr. Flaherty, my pot-maker, was always willing to be reshaped and remolded. How many 70 year old white male priests give young women books on feminist theology? How many dyed-in-the-wool Irish priests want to learn from the Buddhist Dalai Lama? How many Catholic priests allow and invite a young woman to play Jesus in the school play, to preach on Sunday mornings? Fr. Flaherty refused to be fired, but instead always remained clay, yielding to God's tender touch.

The thing about being remolded is that it doesn't change WHO we are. We are still the same lump of clay, we just look different from the outside. So where are the places that St. Luke acts like we are already fired, already cast into a single expectation? Where are we fired, unable to respond to God's new dreams? Where are we apt to break rather than bend? This is what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson when he speaks of shouldering our cross. When we shoulder our cross it means we have taken up the mission of God. It means that we want to be faithful followers. That we want to be a congregation responsive to God's dreams. And if we say that, then as the Gospel today said, we must be willing to take what is dearest to us, whether plans or people, or prized pottery pots, and kiss it good-bye. So, will we be fired....or unfired? Will we yield to God's potter's touch or will we chip and break with rigidity? Fired or unfired, it's our choice. Amen.