

Potter's Wheel: Reworked Not Thrown Away: *Jeremiah 18:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 8, 2019, Proper 18, Year C

“Go to the Potter’s House,” the prophet hears the Spirit nudging, and Jeremiah goes. All around us, there are lessons of life, parables that speak the truth about us and our world. Today’s lesson happens inside a potter’s house.

Potters in Jeremiah’s days performed their craft similarly to those today, but for different purposes. Today’s potters are artists. They craft to amaze and express. Ancient prophets were workers, not artists. They made pots and plates, not for display, but for use. A jar for oil. A pot for baking. A cup for wine. Everyday, cupboard pottery, not for the mantle.

A misshapen pot could be beautiful, but it wouldn’t be very useful in the marketplace.

This potter sees the pot spoiling in her hands, and she starts over. I’m told, when you start with a lump of clay, you never know what you’re going to get. Sometimes it molds perfectly. Other times, unexpectedly. You may get distracted. Place too much pressure. Or not enough pressure. The clay may start to harden. And so you start again.

Pottery is messy. Unpredictable. Jeremiah probably got some specks of clay on his clothes as he watched the potter shape, then reshape that pot. It was hot in there, sweat on her forehead, dripping down into the pot she was making.

Unpredictable. Messy. Hard, unpredictable work. This is what Jeremiah sees in the Potter’s House.

There is a lie. It might be the most insidious lie we tell ourselves. It goes by a lot of names, masking itself as wisdom or sometimes, even, as religious truth.

But don’t be fooled. It’s a lie.

I heard the lie speak again last Tuesday night, when a group of us gathered at the Norwalk Easter Public Library for a discussion around gun violence. “Bad people will do bad things,” the lie said. “Take away their guns, and they’ll find a way. They’re bad, and there’s nothing we can do to stop them.” The lie spoke again, but from the other side of the room: “Gun owners can’t be trusted. Why would anyone want a gun. They’re evil.” Such certainty. No room for disagreement, for nuance, for change.

Sometimes the lie speaks to us about others. They are wrong. Their kind is outside of God’s will. Outside of God’s love.

Other times, the lie speaks to us about ourselves. I am wrong, flawed, too lost to be redeemed. Sometimes the lie may speak the opposite--but still a fable--I'm too good to ever do or think something like that. That's not who I am. Thank God I'm not like them.

It sounds like truth. The world, you and me, the future, our fates are fixed. Even God is fixed. There is a plan, and it's set ahead of time. No room for change. Good apples and bad apples. And God is keeping the good; throwing out the bad. Sounds true, but is it?

I threw out some bad apples the other day...into the compost bin. You'll never believe what happened. Those bad apples began to decompose. Right there with the grass clippings and old fall leaves. Before I knew it, the bad apple was gone, transformed into dark, fresh soil. So, I took that soil, placed around my garden plants like clay, shaping a dish that would feed nutrients into the life of that plant. A bad apple, giving life.

All around us, there are lessons, parables that expose the lie and show us the truth.

So, what is the truth? "Can I not do with you...just as the potter has done?" That's the word the Prophet hears from the Lord.

Looking around his nation, Jeremiah is convinced of the future. He's staked his life on it, given up his career, friendships, even his family. The house of Israel is coming to an end. They've turned from God to idols, and God's Judgment is coming.

Jeremiah doesn't like the message. But he believes it, and believes he is called to declare that message as loud as he can, no matter the consequences.

But what if one of the consequences is that the people hear what he has to say, and change their ways? These evil, idol-worshipping, ungrateful, hedonistic, unjust people--can they repent? And, if they did, does that not make them still guilty of past wrongdoing. They've sinned. They deserve punishment. Thus says the Lord!

Ahhhh...but there's the lie again, Jeremiah.

So God sends Jeremiah to the potter's house. See the potter, like God, is a creator. And every creator knows that it doesn't always go as you think it will go. Sometimes the creation just has a mind of its own. Sometimes, the creator makes a mistake. Or changes her mind.

It's all unpredictable, isn't it? Things haven't gone like we thought they would. People don't always act the way they're supposed to. Our lives, careers, our children, family and friends--we try so hard, but sometimes, it's all so very disappointing.

Throw it out! Throw them all out! They're spoiled. They're worthless!
I'm spoiled. I'm worthless.

The lie, in all its glory! But the truth is right there on the potter's wheel. Even when spoiled, it's remade. Could it be with us? When this world, when others let us down, could they, not, too, be refashioned?

What's not so clear in the scripture, though, is who exactly is on that potter's wheel. Is it the nation of Israel? Is it us--the church, our nation--or you and I individually? Maybe...hmmm...maybe it's God.

Now, before you throw me out for blasphemy, let's give this a thought. God, or rather, God's will, on the potter's wheel. The immutable, unchangeable mind of God--spoiled then refashioned?

Of course, God's character remains the same--always good, always loving--yesterday, today, and forever--that's what scripture says. And God's overall purpose, work--remains the same, to fashion this beloved community that transforms the world.

But such work takes, well, work. Perhaps even the potter doesn't know exactly how it will all shape up. Two people in a garden...what could go wrong? A barren old couple, creating a nation? A nation, bringing hope to the world? The very potter already covered in clay, messy, hot, and dirty from spinning and refashioned for thousands of years, chooses to become the clay? The creator becoming the creation? What could go wrong?

In the September 2010 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*, Hannah Marshall writes, "Raised in Clay: Musings of a Potter's Daughter."

In the fall of 1990, Dad, Mom, and my brother lugged cardboard boxes full of equipment, a kiln, dry clay materials, carts, and plaster molds across town to a drab but hopeful building. I was three when we moved into the three-room studio, which would house my dad's slip-cast creations.

The studio is always frigid in winter and sweltering in summer. The glaze smells like rotten Chinese take-out, and a bucket of clay water wafts the smell of mold through the air. This place wakes me up.

I am connected to my father's work: his daughter, part of his DNA and his thought process. My family together worked the slip and dried pots; it never felt individual, like the work was our father's only. Dad glazing pots; Mom sat in the office, shuffling through W2 forms and craft fair applications. My brothers lifted the 40 lb. molds and trimmed the edges of wet pots. The place and the processes feel organic and cyclical. As for me, I can fettle bone-dry clay as well as any potter, holding the knife's round handle and scraping the blade fastidiously around thin, sharp rims.

My dad makes buckets of slip from recycled and newly-mixed clay to form his clean-lined pots. The pots dry and are finished and fired, or they break and are recycled, and we rework the clay again and again until it is perfected. I watch this process of birth and death, destruction and rebirth: it is my life simplified.

Craft is not romantic; creation is not mysterious. I could breathe eloquent words into the pottery studio and make you believe it was a dusty Garden of Eden, but it really is made of stone, brick, clay, sweat. It reminds me of every day I live: wake up, go for a run, eat breakfast, work. Creating pottery is creating a life where each day makes up profound and meaningful years.

The work is deep in us; my family is the clay. We will be worked and reworked until we can finally find the shape for which we were intended.

Ahh...there, there is the truth, right there in the potter's house. Don't believe the lie. Listen. "Can I not do with you...just as this potter has done?" the prophet hears the Lord speak. "Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand."

In the potter's house, the outcomes are not predetermined. Good, bad--listen to the words being spun. "I will change my mind," the potter whispers. Harsh words are spoken there: "pluck up; break down; destroy," we hear muttered. But then, at another moment, "I will build; I will plant; I will change."

Change. Change. We will be worked and reworked. Every day, every mistake...or, if you want to use biblical words, every sin...broken down and built up; destroyed but reborn.

People of God, don't believe the lie. About you. About them. About this world. About all of y'all--all of us. Look around, yeah, it may look bleak at times. Spoiled, even. But the potter's not done. In fact, her work has only begun, and you and I, we're invited to jump right in with the potter, and get messy in the clay.

Amen.