

Clay in the Potter's Hand

Jeremiah 18:1-4, II Corinthians 4:6-7

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1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." 3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Jeremiah 18:1-4

6 For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. II Corinthians 4:6-7

In the passage from the prophet Jeremiah, God invites Jeremiah to enter a potter's shed and there observe the potter working with clay, so that Jeremiah may better hear God's words (Jeremiah 18:1), understand God's way with Israel (18:6), and summon God's people to be transformed and turn back towards God. (18:11).

Jeremiah must leave his own familiar spaces, step away from the holy writings and the sanctuaries, bypass the committee meetings and professional development seminars, and instead learn about God, the Holy One and God's people by watching a craftsman at work.

Artists and craftsmen and women, people who create may invite our souls to experience a deeper mystery than only reading words on a page. We too must visit the potter's shed. I like to think about times I have watched a potter at work at a wheel. Or glass blowers working the glass. Watch the painter mix her paints and fill her canvas in the open air. Feel the weaver's coarse-spun wool as he weaves a tapestry of richly colored threads. Smell the shavings in the woodworker's garage as she shapes and matches the joints. Hear the songwriter test chord progressions and lyrical phrases as she scribbles, strums, and hums.

When you do, you will learn something new about God and you will hear a fresh summons for God's people. The Holy One in the act of creating and transforming.

Other biblical passages invite us to imagine Holy One 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. The image is not new in the scriptures. Genesis 1 portrays God as the first poet, designer, and landscaper, as God speaks, divides, fashions, and populates the cosmos. (1)

In Genesis 2:7 God first shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. Making the *hadam* – earth creature – from the *hadamah* – the earth. As God's hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, God breathes life into God's new creation, so that the human

being is simultaneously grounded by this connection to earth and animated by the very breath of God.

Now, in Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once for all. God tells Jeremiah that God's people are like clay that has not yet been fired. As we too go down into the potter's shed, 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 pitcher, a storage jar, a lamp. 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 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 there are cracks, broken places are found in us, works diligently to transform them.

After Jeremiah's visit to the potter's shed, 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 (Jeremiah 18:6), God changes gears and begins to talk about God's plans for nations and kingdoms. When people make choices that resist justice and shalom and they do not lift up the poor or care for the earth, there are consequences. The Holy One calls people to a life of wholeness and compassion. Parts of Jeremiah are full of judgment and describe of what happens to people whose greed and corruption and abuse of creation guides them instead their covenant with the Divine. A theology of God that cares and responds.

We see that at the heart of this passage is the complex interaction between God the artist and maker, on one hand, and, on the other, God's people, who are like clay in God's hands, but are also so much more. God cannot make us do anything. God cannot *make* us use our gifts or choose the good. Nor can God effect our conversion or direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose if we do not also choose them. Spirit who loves, who invites, who calls, who is in us and around us.

The passage from 2nd Corinthians is one of my favorite passages of Paul's writings. "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us".

Clay is a helpful metaphor because it keeps us from thinking it is all about us. God didn't fashion us from high tech, titanium, super fancy polymers or Waterford crystal. God uses the

metaphor of clay. Useful. Fragile. Beautiful. Easily broken. Able to be mended and re-worked. We are stuff of the earth, utilitarian and meant to be useful.

In a sermon by Rev. Marci Glass, she writes - Clay needs to be worked by other hands. It can't make itself into something of beauty. We, ourselves, are the work of God's creating hands. We forget that and start thinking the extraordinary power Paul writes about belongs to us, not to God. Even if our creative power will never be the same as God's, I do think we can help each other out, smoothing over the rough places and helping each other find beauty in the cracks and broken places of our lives. (2)

For the apostle Paul, and Jeremiah before him, our fragile, imperfect humanity is not something to ignore or to pretend doesn't exist. We also aren't called to wallow in it. "Oh well, I'm already a mess so I might as well just be an even bigger mess."

When scripture calls us clay and God the potter, it speaks to a constant and continuing relationship, never to a life that is unredeemable.

Yes, we often are feel overwhelmed or unsure or full of regret, lumps of clay that feel so mis-shapen, we wonder if we are beyond repair. But God is always at work in and through us. God is constantly seeking to re-shape into becoming vessels of grace and mercy for the world.

How are you being shaped by the source of Love?

There is a calling to be quiet and enter in a deeper place of awareness

There is an invitation to notice where we feel stuck.

There is an invitation to notice what brings us joy.

There is an invitation to be experience encouraging others and working together.

Two of my practices of being re-shaped are – writing in my journal and Sabbath. In my journal, I write about - What is coming up for me in this season of my life? Questions, joys, sadness, and gratitude. Where in my life do I sense the Spirit nudging me? Another is my Friday Sabbath. I take time that day to play, to rest, to read, to go out for breakfast or lunch with Jeffrey. More being and less doing. Unplug from computer and phone.

How are you being re-shaped by the Holy One?

God remains at work, seeking to reshape us into something of beauty and use for the world.

Are you willing to see beauty in imperfection? Are you willing to be shaped and re-shaped by the God who created you in beauty and for good?

We are the clay, and you are our potter are all the work of your hand. Amen

1) <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-181-11-3>

2) <https://marciglass.com/2015/03/21/we-are-the-clay/>