



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

In Your Hands Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1:1-21

I enjoy words. I like what words mean and how they fit together. I like how they sound. Onomatopoeia are words that sound like what they reference, words like boom, splash, pop, meow, bark, and ribbit. Then there are other words that don't sound anything like what they mean. "Formication" (with an "m") has nothing to do with morality. It is the unrealistic sensation of having ants crawling over your skin. "Noisome" is not about sound; instead it refers to something that smells bad or is offensive. The word "pulchritude" makes me think of something nauseating, but it is actually a rather high-minded word for beauty. And there is "capricious," a word that, to me, sounds like something fun, carefree, and happy; yet, it means "characterized by or liable to sudden unpredictable changes in attitude or behavior" (Dictionary.com). Being impulsive can, at times, be fun, but a person whose moods change in an instant and whose behavior is unpredictable is no fun to be around. I rarely feel carefree or happy around someone who is capricious.

As Jeremiah tells this parable about the potter, at first hearing, I get the ominous feeling that God is capricious, especially toward the end of the passage when he says,

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Jeremiah 18:7-10

God sounds like a very impetuous, fickle, impatient potter to me.

To be sure, God had good reason to act that way. Jeremiah was speaking in the late sixth or early seventh century before Christ's birth to people who believed in many gods. They believed these gods had power

over all humanity. Whichever god was the strongest was the god whose people won battles and gained advantage over other people. One of God's greatest irritations and heartbreaks was that the Israelite people were forever chasing after whichever god they thought had more power at the moment.

Jeremiah knew better. He knew that God was the only god and he knew that God was far from capricious. Instead, God was loving and patient. In order to convince the people, he went down to a potter's house for an object lesson. Pottery making was an ancient and practical craft even in those days. Potters made useful utensils like pots to hold water, to store food, and to cook in. They made bricks for walls and houses, lamps for light, and toys for children's play.¹

A good carpenter observes the old adage, "measure twice, cut once," but potters are not always limited by their mistakes. A potter places a lump of clay on the wheel and begins to spin and shape it, but if the shape is not correct or the potter is otherwise not pleased with it, she can mold it back into a lump of clay and start over. Rather than being frustrated or impatient, the intentional potter carefully reworks the clay into the useful object that is desired.

Jeremiah's message to Israel was that God will lovingly use life's circumstances to reshape you, to remake you into the people God intended. Often those circumstances will be pleasant. Sometimes they will be unpleasant, even traumatic, but God will mold us into useful vessels of God's grace.

If you ever watch a potter work on a wheel, you see that the spinning of the wheel, the pressure of the fingers and palm, and the various tools he uses fashion the clay into amazing shapes and designs that are a far cry from that indistinguishable lump of clay. Sometimes, if the clay is off-center, if there is a bit of debris in it, or if too much pressure is applied, it becomes misshapen and collapses. Then the potter carefully begins the process once again.

The message to the Israelite people was clear: while God is powerful and influences events in our lives, God does so intentionally and lovingly. There is no brute power involved. It is not about who wins or loses. It is

¹Doug Bratt, "Old Testament Lectionary: Jeremiah 18:1-11," *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (August 29, 2016); available online at: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-18c/?type=old_testament_lectionary

about who is the One and Only Potter and about how we allow God to shape our lives. The Israelites were on the wheel . . . and so are we!

But the Gospel is not just about us and what God will do for us. Over and over, Israel mistakenly thought it was. Some of the early believers in Christ did, too. Sometimes we think the Good News is only about us as well.

The curious and brief letter addressed to Philemon, which we heard read earlier, reminds us to think otherwise. The circumstances surrounding this letter are obscure. No one really knows who Philemon was or much about Onesimus. The basic story being told is that Onesimus, a runaway slave, had been discipled by Paul and had become a believer in Jesus Christ and thus a spiritual brother to Paul. Paul was now in prison and Onesimus had become his personal assistant, providing both companionship and support during his incarceration. Paul knew that legally, both he and Onesimus could be held accountable for his failure to return to his owner whose name was Philemon. Morally, he wanted everyone to do the right thing concerning Onesimus and his servitude.

A legal declaration of emancipation would be best for Onesimus, so Paul sent him back to Philemon with a letter appealing to Philemon's Christian charity to release Onesimus from bondage. On many levels, the letter tells a story of redemption and freedom for Onesimus and Philemon.

The potter is patiently at work in this story. We already know that he has reshaped Paul's life from the vengeful Pharisee known as Saul who murderously persecuted Christians and endeavored to rid the world of their heresy. Through a vision of Christ, the healing kindness of Ananias, and the teaching ministry of other Christians, God reshaped Saul the persecutor into Paul the missionary. Through Paul, God lovingly took a runaway slave, valued only for his ability to work for his master, and reshaped him into Onesimus, a precious child of God and willing servant of Christ.

Through the Paul and Onesimus, we see Philemon on the potter's wheel, wrapped in the skilled and gentle hands of God who carefully and lovingly reshapes his heart. From a master who looks on another human being as less than human and merely property to use as he will, Philemon is molded into a compassionate disciple who understands Onesimus as his brother in Christ.

Earlier today, in a ritual that is unfamiliar to us, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was canonized as a saint. We do not have such a process or set individuals apart in that way. Our understanding is that all believers are saints, "holy ones," to use biblical language. Nevertheless, we all marveled at the way God used Mother Teresa to change the lives of other people. And we know how very human and ordinary she was, given her own doubts and struggles with faith. Still, day after day, she sat at the potter's wheel in Calcutta, God's hands wrapped around her own, and she helped shape the lives of the poor and the lives of everyone who paid attention.

God calls us, as he did Jeremiah and Paul, Onesimus and Philemon, Mother Teresa and untold believers through the centuries to be reshaped and to help reshape the lives of other people. God's hands work lovingly and patiently. Lives are changed. And the wheel continues to spin

September 4, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the Creator and Sustainer of all that was and is and is to come, we gather around your table to offer our praise for your many blessings to us. You give us life and then fill our lives with an abundance of gifts that give our days meaning and purpose: work and play which allow us to provide for ourselves and use our talents and resources for the good of others, the beauty of your creation which inspires and delights us, companions with whom to share the joys and challenges of this journey, your grace which sustains us through our moments of celebration and sorrow. In all circumstances, O Lord, you have been faithful to your promises made to your people generations ago yet still spoken clearly and personally for us today: The promises that you would never leave us and that through your Son Jesus Christ you would offer the gift of your mercy to all who would receive it. For these and all of the gracious gifts which come from your generous hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

We come, too, O God, because we confess that we need the renewal which your grace offers to us in this place. We are sometimes a forgetful people, so we need to be reminded. We are often an impatient people, so we need a time of stillness and reflection, a time of listening for your voice and waiting for your Spirit. We are sometimes a stubborn people, so we need to be reshaped, molded again in the likeness of Christ who gave himself for us.

We also come seeking your guidance and grace in the daily demands of our lives and the lives of others. Too many in our world live in the midst of violence or unrest. For these, O Lord, empower us to be messengers of your peace. Too many in our city suffer because of poverty, neglect or hopelessness. For these, O Lord, enable us to offer compassion. Too many of our own number struggle because of sickness or loneliness or worry. For these, O Lord, inspire us to extend hospitality and companionship that will bring healing and comfort. Too many of us live with fear or insecurity or doubt because of strained relationships, perplexing circumstances or uncertain futures. For each of us and all of us, O Lord, grant us grace enough for this day and hope for all our days to come.

As we join our brothers and sisters in this place and believers of all times and places to feast at your table, may we be reminded of the wonder that is ours because we are a people created in your image, the love that is ours because we are a people redeemed, the joy that is ours because we are a people who hold the promises of abundant life now and eternal life with you. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we make these and all our prayers. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
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