

“Shaped by God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Jeremiah 18: 1-11

If you have ever seen a potter work with clay and a potter’s wheel, then you know what a special talent that truly is. Starting with a lump of clay, she takes water in her hand, begins applying pressure as the wheel spins round and round. Slowly, you see that lump turn into a bowl, a jar, a vase, or some other shape, and bit by bit, the potter works carefully to refine its shape into what fits her eye. And, if it doesn’t seem to work on the first try, she simply takes the clay, pushes it down, and starts over from scratch.

I’ve never really tried molding clay the way a potter does. I am in awe of anyone who has such a gift to take a lump of material and turn it into something beautiful and long-lasting. If I remember correctly, the white communion chalices that we use for worship each month here were sculpted and shaped by our own Ann Owen many years ago. Every time I lift them up at the table, or we dip the bread in the juice, I am reminded of the great amount of time and talent it took to create something which is a sacred part of our sacramental life as a church.

Probably the closest I have come to a potter molding clay is working with drywall. I know, it’s a stretch, but bear with me. When you’re installing drywall, you have to tape and mud the joints so that there is a smooth finish on which to paint. It can take two, three, even four applications of joint compound, or mud, to spread evenly over the joints. And, I imagine like the potter, it can be hard to know when to stop making changes. I always struggle with constantly redoing what I’ve done, thinking there will be a better product in the end. What I’ve learned, though, is at some point you have to stop and let your finished work stand on its own. Potters probably struggle with this, too, and perhaps they have an inherent sense of when their work is truly “finished.”

The image of a potter sitting at the potter’s wheel is what we see in the first four verses of this passage from Jeremiah. The Lord tells the prophet to “go down to the potter’s house,” for that is where the Lord will speak to him. Once there, Jeremiah sees the potter at his wheel with a pot that has spoiled. Instead of throwing it away, the potter reworks the clay, and molds it into another vessel “as it seemed good to him.” It is this image of the potter and the clay that the Lord uses to illustrate his message to the prophet and the people of Israel.

But this familiar image is more than about us as individuals being shaped by God’s hand and God’s will. It is about how God shapes us as a community of faith to reflect the kingdom of God in our witness to the world. And while the second half of this passage may cause us to question God’s providence or “goodness” for us, there is still everlasting hope in the prophet’s message – not only for Israel in Jeremiah’s time, but for us today.

To begin, it is important to understand the context in which the prophet is preaching his message. In Jeremiah’s lifetime, the kingdom of Judah went from being ruled by a reformist King Josiah, to being overrun by the Babylonian Empire and taken into exile. Jeremiah went from having hope in the rededication of the

people to the covenant of Moses under Josiah, to the Jews being led away into captivity. The text we have read today likely coincides with Jeremiah resuming his preaching after King Josiah's death. And it is delivered to a people who are firmly in exile from their homeland, desperate to hear some words of hope.

This context helps explain better the sense of judgment and disaster that surrounds the second half of the passage. As 21st-century Christians, this passage seems rather arbitrary and severe on a first reading: "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it . . . At another moment I will do this . . . I may change my mind." If you read this without any context, you might think God is toying with the Israelites, not making any firm commitments about how he will act for or against them. Where is the hope in this passage?

Actually, it is because of the context that the Israelites heard hope from Jeremiah. These words came to them in exile, when they were far from Jerusalem and their homeland, living under foreign domination. They believed God had made a final, irreversible decision from which they could never recover. They wanted to believe that God might still save them; that God might change his mind.

And the prophet gives them hope: "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" (18:8). Of course, the opposite is true, as well: For the nation God seeks to build up and plant, "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" (18:10).

That is why the image of the clay in the potter's hand is so powerful. God is holding the people of Israel in the palm of his hand, like a potter holds clay on the potter's wheel. God will shape the people into the form that best suits God's desire for his kingdom to come forth. The hope is found not in God's never-changing mind, but in God's openness to see how the people respond to God's Word in their lives of faith. Will they respond faithfully, or will they "not listen to God's voice?"

If we go back to verse four, we read that "the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand," and it was because of this flaw that the whole thing had to be reworked into something new. However, we never know what that flaw was; only that something did not allow the potter to achieve the final product he envisioned.

For me, when working with drywall, there can be times when there is a flaw on the board that keeps poking through the mud or tape, and has to be removed for the final finish to be smooth. Or, the joint compound, over time, begins to stiffen and dry out, making it harder to achieve a consistent finish. There is a limited time to do the task, or else it has to be scrapped and done again.

The potter has his hands all around us, but that doesn't mean we cannot resist the ways God is seeking to reshape us. The people of Israel had resisted listening to the voice of the Lord for so long, and they ended up in exile in Babylon. We can sing the familiar song, "melt me, mold me, fill me, use me," but unless we are open to being shaped, the potter will never be able to mold us into the vessels he envisions.

Have there been times in life when you have resisted the potter's hand in shaping you? Perhaps it was choosing to engage in some self-destructive behavior, when you knew deep down it was not the direction you needed to go in. Perhaps it was turning away from a cherished relationship due to some small disagreement, when you knew deep down how much that individual meant to your life. Perhaps it

was choosing to invest your money in greater material possessions, when you knew deep down they did not bring you true fulfillment.

Have there been times in the church's life when we have resisted the potter's hand? Perhaps it was choosing to stay with a program or ministry for sentimental reasons, when we knew deep down that it was time to reshape that clay into something new. Perhaps it was choosing the same individuals who have always served in leadership, when we knew deep down that new voices and ideas could sculpt us into something brilliant. Perhaps it was choosing to invest our resources in ways they have always been spent, when we knew deep down that another approach or idea might re-energize our life in community.

The question for the Israelites, the question for the church, the question for us, is: which direction will we turn? Will we turn away from God's desire to shape us, or will we turn toward the potter who yearns to mold us according to his will? We often hear the word "repent," and we think of judgment and televangelists yelling at the top of their lungs. But the true meaning of repentance is to turn back to God - to return to God's path for our lives. There has to be an impetus for such a change, for such a "re-turning" back to God. Jeremiah is calling on the Israelites to return to God, so that they might be shaped in a positive way.

How have you been shaped and molded in the past, to return to God? Has it been a family member or close friend, who did not judge you when you made a mistake, but helped you learn from your misstep so that you might grow in maturity? Has it been a teacher who saw in you a gift you might not have recognized on your own, and through their guidance set you on your path today? Has it been a mentor, who listened patiently when you struggled, who modeled healthy behavior for you, and who has always been there, in good times and bad? All of us have been shaped, in one way or another, by a loving God for lives of discipleship. Sometimes we tend to forget those influences, and maybe in our forgetting we realize our focus has drifted away from God, and we are in need of reorientation.

The same could be said of our life in the church. Celebrations, tragedies, milestones, and everyday events fill our communal life. It is easy to become engrossed in it all, that we can forget to allow the potter to mold us, thinking we are a perfect, finished vessel just the way we are. As we have heard from Jeremiah, God's essence may never change, but God is always working on us to achieve his will. We can either be fearful and anxious about the unknown of the future, or we can embrace it in faith and trust and dedication that the potter will always shape us to the best creation we can be.

"Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand" (18:6). May we remain flexible, pliable, and excited about how God has, is, and will continue to shape us into his vessels of grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.