

September 14, 2003 Pentecost 14

"The Potter and the Clay"

JEREMIAH 18:1-10

T*his is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. ⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.*

"It's in the Lord's hands." Have you ever said this to yourself when you were facing a surgery, the birth of a child, the desperate search for a new job? How different your view of life is from a neighbor across the street who stoically says to herself, "I'll try and do my best and hope in luck for all the rest." Or even "I can thank my lucky stars," as if somehow the alignment of the stars has something to do with how things turn out in life

"It's in the Lord's hands." I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard someone say that during my years of service as a pastor. I think I could take you all out to lunch. And we never grow tired of hearing someone say, "It is in the Lord's hands!" Some of you sitting here this morning have had a difficult week. You are not alone. Your life is in the Lord's hands, whether you are facing problems with your health, or trying to decide on something for your future, or just putting up with the routine grinds of life. It is not always the mountains we have to climb that drag us down, but the sand that gets into our shoes. "It is always, always, always, ALL in the Lord's hands."

Today we want to walk with Jeremiah to the house of the potter and watch him take a lump of wet clay, spin it on his spindle, and shape it into a pot. Look more closely and you will see in that wet lump of clay, your life in the hands of your loving Lord and God. Open up your Bibles or your bulletin and follow along verse by verse to see **"The Potter and the Clay."**

1) The potter has power over the clay

What we notice first is the absolute power and authority the potter has over the clay. He shapes it according to his will and desire. Our text says, "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, 'Go down to the potter's shop and there I will give you my message.'" The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. It was clear, precise, exact message. "Go down to the potter's shop." The word of God that has been given to us in the Bible is precise, reliable and trust worthy. "Holy men of God spoke as they were carried along

by the Holy Spirit." We do not have to read a portion of the Scriptures and wonder to ourselves if this is really a message from the Lord.

Jeremiah listens to the word of the Lord, and he makes his visit to the potter's shop. "So I went down to potter's house and saw him working at the wheel." There was the potter, sitting at his wheel, turning the spindle with his feet. The spindle turned the shaft that spun the round table on which the wet lump of clay was resting. See the feet kicking the spindle. See the table turning. Watch the hands shape the clay into a design for a future pot. Vases, bowls cups, saucers, large water pots, all were carefully shaped by the hands of the potter that held power over the lump of clay.

The Hebrew word for "potter" is the same word used in Psalm 95 to describe how God formed our world: "The sea is his and he made it and his hands formed the dry land." The Lord created the deep rifts in the oceans and formed the mountains. They did not develop over millions of years of time. Psalm 121 says, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills- where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The Lord formed our world the way a potter forms the clay, not over eons of time, but in one sudden burst of energy and power.

When archaeologists uncover ancient sites, they often discover pieces of broken potter that help them date the level at which they are digging. I cannot imagine an archaeologist ever saying, "This piece of broken pottery that I am holding in my hand probably developed when a rainstorm sent a ball of clay rolling down the hill. It probably started spinning to get its shape and hit a stone to form the inside. Then it probably dried in the sun, and a forest fire came through and probably hardened it. If you suggested this origin of a clay pot to your professor while you were working with other students, you would be laughed out of the class and even failed for your foolishness. Yet students across this land of ours are being taught in college classrooms that our world, far more complex than a lump of clay and a pot, evolved on its own without the hand of any designer. By God's amazing grace, you believe the Lord is the Maker of heaven and earth. You believe the Lord formed our world from the matter he made, not over millions of years of time, but in one glorious shining moment.

We stand next to Jeremiah and watch in amazement as the potter takes the clay and forms a pot spinning the wheel with his feet and shaping with his hands. We are reminded of how the Lord also formed and shaped us as he told Jeremiah in chapter one, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." In Psalm 139 the Psalmist says, "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The body you have this morning, the color of your eyes, the shape of your nose, the muscles, lungs, heart, and thousands of miles of blood vessels carrying nourishment and life to each cell, are all an amazing creation of God.

Look again at the hand of the potter as he rejects the clay that has become marred. "But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands, so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as it seemed best to him." The potter will not settle for a pot that is marred, that is not shaped correctly, or that has some sand in it that will later cause the pot to be weakened and break. The Hebrew word for marred is a strong word that is also translated as corrupt. It is used in Genesis 6 to describe the corruption of people in this world prior to the great world flood. The word "pit" that is found in the Old Testament

also comes from this word "corrupt." The pit is a place of corruption from which there is no escape. Sin does that to us. It mars us and corrupts us and makes us unfit for the Lord. Psalm says, "The Lord has redeemed me from the pit," redeemed me from corruption.

I am holding in my hand a cup. It was once a piece of clay, formed into the shape of cup, and painted, and glazed and fired in the furnace. If I take this cup and throw it down hard on the cement, it will break into hundreds of pieces. Nothing can be done with it except, sweep it up and throw it away. So it was with sin in your life. It dashed you to the ground, destroyed all hope of being accepted by God. Then the hand of God reached into your life to rescue you. The hand of God sent his Son to live the life you could never live, and die the perfect death that can give your life back to you. The hand of God makes you a new person in Christ and shapes you for his glory, instead of being broken into hundreds of pieces and thrown into the pit, you are now a perfect creation in the eyes of God through Jesus. Joyfully with the prophet Isaiah we say, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.:" Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

That brings me to the next point of the sermon. The potter not only has power over the clay to shape as he wants, he also has a plan for the clay. He knows exactly what he wants to do with it.

2) The potter has a plan for the clay

The Lord wanted Jeremiah to look at the potter and see the plan that he had for people, including the nation of Israel. "Then the Word of the Lord came to me: 'O house of Israel can I not do with you as the potter does?' declares the Lord." The potter had a plan for the clay, to make it into the kind of pot he wanted it to be. The Lord had a plan for the nation of Israel. They were his chosen people to be richly blessed, and the people from whom the Savior was to come.

The Lord not only had plans for the nation of Israel, he has plans for all people here on the face of this earth. "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of the its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned." Abraham prayed for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. If these cities had repented, the Lord would have spared them even if there were only a handful of people within that city who believed. The Lord also said that if he had plans for a nation, and it turned its heart against him as Israel had done, then it would uprooted and destroyed.

The Lord who is the potter shapes the destinies of nations and uses them for his purpose and plan. Caesar Augustus, the mighty emperor of Rome, issued a decree that all the world should be taxed. This decree of the Roman emperor resulted in Jesus being born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling a prophecy that was made in the book of Isaiah. In Acts 17 we are told that the Lord steps into the affairs of world history, because he has a master plan, he is the potter and we are the clay. Paul told the people of Athens, "God determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. He did not so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him."

The Lord who has a plan for the nations and moves the events of world history so people can seek him and find him, also has a plan for your life and mine. Isaiah 29 says, "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He did not make me?'" Can the pot say of the potter, 'He knows nothing?'"

Does the Lord have a plan for your life? Yes, he does. You may be a cracked vessel, a clay pot, but you hold the greatest treasure of the world as we are told in 2 Corinthians 4, "We have this treasure in jars of clay." "We bear about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ."

When we were married, Susan and I received several vases as gifts. Over the years, we have enjoyed using these vases to display flowers or roses from the garden. The purpose of the vase is not to draw attention to itself but to the flowers inside. The potter, who has shaped your life in Christ and made you a new person in Jesus, also has mapped out in his mind the various ways he will use you to bring glory to Jesus. Knowing this truth about the potter and the clay we are not ashamed of the gospel song that says,

Have thine own way Lord!

Have thine own way!

Thou art the potter; I am the clay.

Mold me and make me after thy will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still.