

September 2, 2012
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.*

Today we join Jeremiah as goes down to the potter's house. We watch as the potter thrusts the soft lump of clay on his potter's wheel. We watch as his feet spin to turn the wheel. His wet hands squeeze the ball of clay and force it into the shape he desires. Eventually we see a pot emerging from the lump of clay to be dried in the sun or fired in the kiln.

Jeremiah got the message. The Lord our God wanted to take the nation of Israel into his loving hands and shape them into the people he wanted them to be. The Lord used Jeremiah to deliver messages, thousands of messages to the people, to bring them to repentance and bring them back to himself.

As you look at the potter working the soft lump of clay, think of how the Lord has shaped and molded your life. He is the potter and we are clay. As Isaiah the prophet said, "Yet, O Lord, you are the Father. We are the clay and you are the potter; we are the work of your hand." Your life is in the hands of the Lord. Whether you are going through good times or difficult times, the Lord is always molding you and shaping you and working out everything for your good and his glory.

The Lord uses so many images to convey his love and concern for us. He tells us that we are his sheep and he is our Shepherd. He pictures himself as an eagle lifting us up on his wings. Jesus is the Vine we are his branches. He is our head and we are his body the church. May the Holy Spirit bless us this morning as we think of how the Lord is our potter and we are the clay!

The potter has power over the clay

We are told that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet. "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord." Over 200 times it says in the book of Jeremiah that the word of the Lord came to him. We are not told how the Lord spoke to Jeremiah. Was it

through a dream, or did he hear the Lord's voice speaking to him, or did the words of the Lord come into his thought patterns? God broke into his life with words he could clearly understand and he knew these words came from the Lord not some evil spirit.

We don't know exactly how the words came to Jeremiah, but we do know how God gave us his words on the pages of the Bible. 2 Peter 1:21 says, "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." In our gospel for today we heard Peter say to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." We know where to go to hear God speak to us. He has miraculously spoken to us on the pages of the Bible. Let's hear what the Lord says about the potter and the clay.

The Lord told Jeremiah, "Go down to the potter's house and there I will give you a message." Jeremiah went to the potter's house and watched the potter work the lump of clay on his wheel. He noticed when the pot he was shaping became marred in his hands he formed it into another pot that seemed more pleasing to him. The potter has total control over the lump of clay. His hands form and shape the lump of clay into some form or shape that he has in his mind.

As a child I enjoyed playing with clay. You could soften the clay in your hands and then make it into different objects. If you did not like what you made, you could roll it up into a ball and make it into different objects. I am holding in my hand a cup that my son made and a dish that my wife made at a pottery place in San Luis. There is a certain satisfaction and joy that comes with being able to form and shape a lump of clay into an object of beauty.

The Hebrew word for pottery is the same word used to describe how God formed and shaped our world. Psalm 95 says, "The sea is his and he made it and his hands formed the dry ground." Psalm 121 says, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills- where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, he Maker of heaven and earth." In Genesis 1 the Lord says, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." What was the original world like that was destroyed in the great world flood? Scientist recently reported that they found evidence of palm trees under the ice of Antarctica.

The Lord also formed man from dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. Here again is that same word that is used for the potter. Psalm 139 describes how you were formed or shaped when you were put together in your mother's womb. "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eye saw my unformed body." The other day we went up to San Luis Bay to see the hump backed whales that were feeding close to shore. People are fascinated by these creatures that God has made. People were everywhere in large numbers. I told Susan, just look at all the different kinds of people our here tonight to watch the whales. Every person is a unique individual formed by God. God formed the massive heart of the whale that is the size of a small car and God uses the same amazing system to pump blood throughout your body.

The potter has control over the lump of clay. He can even take a piece of clay that is marred and misshapen and reshape it in a way that is pleasing to the potter. The word

used here for marred is a word that is most often translated as corrupted. It is used in Genesis 6 to describe the corruption of the world prior to the great world flood. It is used in Psalm 103 to describe the pit with the words, "He has redeemed me from the pit." Isaiah uses this word to describe the corruption that existed in God's people because of their idolatry. "Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him."

How can we not look at this marred or corrupted lump of clay without thinking about how corrupted we have become in the eyes of our God because of our sin. The sinful flesh of Adam and Eve has been passed down to each of us. Last week we heard the Lord tell us in Jeremiah 17, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, who can understand." The piece of clay that is marred and misshapen cannot keep spinning around by itself and turn itself into a nice looking pot. It's only hope for beauty and acceptance rests in the hands of the potter.

We can stand in awe of the hand of God that created our world, or the hand of God that formed us in our mother's womb, or the hand of God that continues to hold the whole world in his hand. What amazes us most about our God is the way his hand takes our sin from us and places it all on Jesus his Son. Isaiah 53 says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." 2 Corinthians 5 says, "God made him to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians also says, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come." Have you ever dropped a cup on a ceramic tile floor? It shatters into hundreds of pieces. You cannot glue it together again. Sin has destroyed our lives. We cannot put them together again. God our heavenly Father takes us in his hands and makes us new people in Christ. Through Jesus we become objects of his unfailing love and mercy.

The potter has a plan for the clay

We need to get back to the potter's house and join Jeremiah in listening to how the Lord applies what the potter is doing with the clay to what he will do with the nation of Israel. "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" "Like the clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hands O house of Israel. 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 its evil, then I will relent and not inflict the disaster I had planned."

Do you know see how the Lord is holding the nation of Israel in his hands? He sends Jeremiah his prophet to the nation to warn it about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. He uses the mouth of the prophet to condemn the worship of Baal and other gods. He uses the prophet to direct the people to come back to the covenant God made with them. In chapter 23 Jeremiah points to the righteous Branch, the Messiah and tells God's people that the Lord is our righteousness. He is the only way people can be restored and brought back to the Lord their God. If these people refused to listen to the Lord then he would have to throw them away and destroy them, the way a potter might reject a lump of clay that is so flawed he cannot use it. The Lord wanted to save his people as Jeremiah pleads in Lamentations, "Restore us unto yourself, O Lord, that we may return."

During this election year people across our country are asking, "What is the best for our country?" This morning as we look at the potter molding the lump of clay, we ask ourselves, "What is the Lord's plan for this nation we call the United States of America?" The Lord wants people living in our land, and all other countries of the world to repent of their false idols, and false beliefs and false trust in themselves. He wants them to come back to him.

What amazes me about the Lord is how he uses people like Jeremiah and also people like you and me to bring his unchanging Word to the people living around us. He is the potter and you are the clay. He has plans to use you for his glory, even when you are cracked and broken. The Apostle Paul said, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." We have the treasures of eternal life through Jesus to share with people living in our community and in our land. The potter knows what to do with the clay. I close with words of Ephesians 2: "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." Amen.