

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11

¹ God told Jeremiah, ² "Up on your feet! Go to the potter's house. When you get there, I'll tell you what I have to say." ³ So I went to the potter's house, and sure enough, the potter was there, working away at his wheel. ⁴ Whenever **the pot the potter was working on turned out badly**, as sometimes happens when you are working with clay, the potter would simply **start over and use the same clay to make another pot**. ⁵ Then God's Message came to me: ⁶ "Can't I do just as this potter does, people of Israel?" God's Decree! "Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel. ⁷ At any moment I may decide to pull up a people or a country by the roots and get rid of them. ⁸ But if they repent of their wicked lives, I will think twice and start over with them. ⁹ At another time I might decide to plant a people or country, ¹⁰ but if they don't cooperate and won't listen to me, I will think again and give up on the plans I had for them. ¹¹ "So, tell the people of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem my Message: 'Danger! I'm shaping doom against you, laying plans against you. Turn back from your doomed way of life. Straighten out your lives.'

Several years ago, when I was the chaplain at Fahrney Keedy, I was asked to make a presentation about Fahrney-Keedy to an older adults group who called themselves, the M&M group. I met with this group on several occasions before because our older adult group at Westminster COB, where I served as Minister of Christian Nurture prior to becoming the chaplain at FKHV, would get together with the M&M group on occasion for luncheons. One time I even presented a program to the M&M group about my trip to New Zealand and Australia. All this is to make the point that I knew—or I should have known—where I was going to meet this group to do my FKHV presentation.

I was to meet the group at 12:00, have lunch with them, and then do my presentation. So, I got everything ready, hopped into my car, and drove to the church. When I arrived, I found only three cars in the parking lot. I knew the M&M group was much larger than that, so I hoped that I was early, and that this wasn't a sign that people were not interested in the topic of my presentation.

I walked into the church and was met by the pastor. He asked me what I could do for him, and I told him that I was there to meet with his older adult group. He looked at me funny and with a look of confusion. He said, "We don't have an older adult group." At first, I insisted that he did, but eventually I realized that I was at the wrong church. I was at the Meadow Branch Church of the Brethren, but I was supposed to be at the Union Bridge Church of the Brethren. The pastor at Meadow Branch, whom I knew well, and I chuckled as I gathered my things back into my car and moved on to the Union Bridge Church. I arrived in plenty of time to enjoy the lunch and make my presentation.

I don't know what I was thinking. I knew where the M&M group met. As I said, I had been there several times before. I knew the way to get there, but for some reason, I went to the wrong place.

The people of Israel in Jeremiah's day were having a similar problem. They knew where they needed to be and who they needed to follow; however, they were headed in the wrong direction. Jeremiah was sent to help the Israelites realize that they were heading in the wrong direction. To help Jeremiah with this task, God sent him to a certain potter's house.

Imagine with me if you will: "The potter nods to Jeremiah, his visitor, but keeps on with his work. He reaches into a container at his side and pulls out a lump of moist, brown clay. He forms it into a ball, and throws it down upon the wheel. The potter adjusts its position, making sure it's exactly in the center, and then begins pumping the foot pedal.

That ball of clay begins to spin faster and faster, until it's just a blur. Then, the potter wets his hands and places them on either side of the spinning mass. Gently, he applies pressure. The clay responds to his caress as though it were a living thing.

Before Jeremiah's wondering eyes, that lump of clay takes shape. First, it grows taller and thinner. Then, it narrows at the base. Next, the potter places his fist on top of it and presses downward with his hand vanishing into the whirling mass, as he hollows out the inside. Removing his hand now,

the potter wets his fingers once again and presses in on the outside wall of the spinning pot. As though responding to his very thoughts, a lip forms at the top of the vessel. That lip leans out, further and further, until the whole mass of clay begins to wobble.

Suddenly, the whole thing collapses, turning inside out. The potter stops his wheel from spinning. At the center there is just a mass of clay again — although in shape it still displays some vague outline of the bowl it almost became before disaster overtook it.

In some trades—like carpentry or weaving—the ruin of a project would be cause for despair. Yet, clay is a highly forgiving medium. The potter simply moistens his hands and picks up that mass of clay once again, forming it into a ball. He slaps the ball down upon the wheel, centers it, and sets it to spinning again."

Jeremiah was seeking a symbol to describe God's relationship to the people of Israel. At the potter's house he found it. This imagery is an excellent symbol of our relationship with God too.

The Potter illustration reveals to us in verses 7&8 that sometimes the clay starts off looking bad, but then improves. At other times, the scripture tells us in verses 9&10 that the clay begins by looking good but then goes bad. Jeremiah explains to us that God is like the potter, constantly working and reworking us into vessels that seem good to him. If we turn from evil temptations and selfish ways, says Jeremiah, we'll be shaped into something wonderful. But, if we persist in ignoring God and living selfish sinful lives, we will be radically refashioned...like a piece of pottery that loses its beautiful shape on the potter's wheel.

It seems to be human nature that we too often want to create and mold our own lives, instead of allowing ourselves to be fashioned and molded. We want to have our own way, not the way of the divine potter, God. When we journey on that selfish and sinful path, we will eventually end up in a ditch. God knows what is best for us. God wants to shape and reshape us into the people he created us to be...people of love and joy...people who bring to others, through service, the hope they need...revealing to others that we are people who are one with God. If we find ourselves traveling down the wrong path, we need to **turn** around and find our way back to the Potter's House.

A word that appears repeatedly in this passage from Jeremiah is "turn." God speaks of a nation that "turns from its evil" (v. 8) and calls for Israel to..."Turn now, all of you from your evil way" (v. 11). God also says that "I will change my mind" about a nation that turns from its evil (v. 8), and "I will change my mind" about a nation that turns toward evil (v. 10). This language of turning and changing is the language of molding and making. Nothing is fixed; everything can change; in fact, everything is changing.

In the town of Athens, Georgia, there was, and may still be, a social service agency called The Potter's House. In this agency, discarded people such as drug addicts and alcoholics learn to re-enter society by fixing people's discarded appliances. There are two simultaneous processes of recycling going on in this work: Drug addicts and alcoholics are rehabilitated as they rehabilitate cast-off appliances. There is no waste in The Potter's House as individuals collect old appliances, repair them and sell them, only to discover that they themselves are repaired in the process.

There is no waste in the Potter's House." The potential of all humanity rests in the idea that God does not create waste, God recycles! There are people who have tough times in life and they may feel that they cannot make it any longer. But God does not create waste. Fortunately, God is ready and eager to take what is broken and fix it; what is wounded and heal it; what is defiled and cleanse it; what is bitter and sweeten it; what is impure and purify it; what is incomplete and make it whole; what is ugly and turn it into something that is beautiful.

If **you** need to make a turn in your life...and you actually do make that turn towards the Potter's house, you then need to allow the potter to work with your clay as he chooses...allow yourself to be shaped and reshaped. Don't worry about what shape you are in now; the potter can reshape you. Don't fixate on the flaws of the past; the potter can purify you. Don't stress about wrong turns you've made in the past; the potter can help you move in a new direction. If you allow yourself to be consumed by these

negative thoughts and behaviors, you will only get in God's way of molding and working with you. In the Potter's House, you are ever-changing clay in the divine potter's hand.

If you feel like you have fallen into the ditch, turn around and begin heading for the Potter's house. Allow the divine potter, God, to make you and mold you, according to his will. Open yourself to being filled with the Holy Spirit, until—as the old hymn "Have Thine Own Way" says—all shall see "Christ only, always, living in me."

Such transformation is sometimes painful because we like to have our own ways. And because we sometimes cannot forgive ourselves for our sin, or we can't imagine ever being worthy of God's interest and care for us. We can't imagine ever being something as beautiful a piece of pottery shaped by the Holy One's hands...let alone being a vessel shaped to hold and pour out the Holy One's presence to others. Waiting for God and yielding to God run counter to our daily routines and thoughts about ourselves. Jeremiah wants us to know that we should not wait until we feel like we are good enough about ourselves to show up at the Potter's house. We should not wait until we feel we are pleasing God.

But unless we find the potter's address, we will never be shaped into the people God wants us to be. We'll end up being less loving, graceful, hopeful, connected and content than we could be. We'll never experience the truly abundant and everlasting life that we could enjoy.

Several years ago, a Boy Scout became separated from his troop while they were on a camping trip. After the scoutmaster failed to locate the boy, he raised the alarm, and the full array of search-and-rescue resources quickly appeared on the scene. Volunteers combed the thick North Carolina woods. A prayer vigil was organized. After nearly three days in the mountains, a search party came across the boy—hungry, disoriented, but fortunately uninjured. A TV news reporter was on hand to record the happy relief of the boy's father. The reporter asked him how his son had gotten lost in the first place.

The father replied that his son had left the campsite voluntarily and was trying to find the nearest highway so he could hitchhike back home.

"And why was he doing that?" the reporter wanted to know.

"He was homesick," his father replied.

How ironic—but yet, how true to life! In seeking to find his way back home, the boy got even more lost. Often, when we lose our way in life, it is a misguided attempt to find our way back home. Yet, God does not just sit and wait for us to get back. God organizes a search party, sending others to call us back to the true way.

God sends out search parties to find us when we get lost in the darkness of our world and in all the mire and muck of our lives. Our responsibility is then, to pay attention...make a turn toward the place where God will remold you as needed. Don't be distracted by dirt roads and dry riverbeds that can lead you off course. Keep turning away from evil and turn toward Jesus Christ. And let yourself be shaped into a person who is right with God and right with neighbors—one who shows Jesus to the world. Amen.