

Sermon for September 4, 2016  
"Go to the Potter's House"

Jeremiah 18:1-11

One day Jeremiah was talkin' to God, as prophets are apt to do, and God said to Jeremiah, "Let's take a walk. I want to show you something." They walked till they came to the potter's house, then they stopped. Jeremiah watched as the potter threw a formless lump of clay on the wheel and started making something. In the potter's hand the vessel began to take shape and form to fit the function that the potter intended for it. But then something went wrong and the pot became unbalanced and off center. It began wobbling and the wobbling got worse and then it fell over. So the potter pounded it down to a formless lump and started again.

Then it dawned on Jeremiah. That was Israel! Israel was clay in the hands of God. Jeremiah ministered during the last days of the southern kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah warned them of the coming disaster and called the nation to repent. But it seemed the more he preached the more they rebelled against God.

So he told them: God is like a potter shaping Israel. God is the one calling the shots and deciding what Israel will be. If the people continue to rebel God can allow them to be conquered. If they repent and turn to God, then the Almighty could form them into something different. Just like a potter has power to form a pot as he or she sees fit, so God can decide, based on their faithfulness or unfaithfulness, what to form them into.

Israel is a pot in God's hands. On the surface it seems a comforting image. It reminds us of God forming the first human out of the dust of the earth and breathing life into it. God is the potter, and I am the clay! Let's all sing "He's Got the Whole World In His Hands" and feel good about things.

Sure the potter has the power to form the clay, and we are clay in the hands of God. A potter can form a lump of clay in to a delicate vessel for perfume or oils. The potter can turn it into a vessel for serving wine or perhaps for sacred religious purposes like the pitcher and communion chalices on the altar. The potter could form the clay into a taurine for serving delicious soups and stews and sauces. Or the potter could form it into a chamber pot. It the potter's prerogative.

Jeremiah's message was not primarily one of comfort. It was a message of judgement. Israel was off center and they were wobbling. The centrifugal forces of idolatry and sin were pushing them farther from what the potter had intended for them. If they got too far off center the potter would let them flop over, and God would remake them. God wanted them to be a vessel carrying God's love and blessing to the nations, but they were in danger of becoming a chamber pot.

But there is grace here. They were still a work in progress. They were still in God's hands! The potter's wheel was still turning and they could be reformed. If they would turn to God, then God could make them into something more. Unlike a lifeless lump of clay, they could re-center themselves and conform to God's plan for them.

They did fall. That is Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed. The educated people and leaders and priests were carried off into exile. Israel was placed under the rule of a foreign power that did not know God.

But God remade them! During this time of exile Israel turned to God. God remade them into something new. They had been tied to their land and their temple. Those things were still important to them, but the ground work was laid for a religion that reached out beyond the land and people of Israel. Through their faithfulness God set the stage for Jesus to come bringing a message of God's love for the whole human race.

"Thou art the potter I am the clay." I am lifeless clay brought to life by God and formed by God. God could form me into a vessel of grace and truth. God could use me to liberate people and free them. God could use me to educate people or bring about social change.

But I have to admit that I am a flawed pot. Sometimes I get off center and begin wobbling. I think more about myself than about my fellow human. I start serving something other than God. I am in danger of falling like Israel did.

But there is grace. Even if I fall like Israel, I can be reformed as Israel was. I am still clay in the potter's hand. The wheel is still turning and I can be remade into something that will serve God. It may not be a sacred vessel. It may only be a simple bowl. But it will glorify God and it will still be on the banquet table.

Go to the potter's house and learn a lesson. You are clay in the potter's hand. Just as the potter forms a lump of clay into a useful vessel, God takes the purposelessness of our lives and shapes them into instruments of God's grace and love. But sometimes the pot is marred and gets off center and flops. We need to beware that we keep centered on God so that the centrifugal forces of sin do not mar our form.

God can shape us and the circumstances of life according to God's will. And even when we do flop, God can reshape us and give us a new purpose. God is a potter of great skill.

Clay has no choice, but we do. If we get off center and begin to fall, we can choose, with God's help, to straighten up. If you find yourself wobbling morally, turn to God. Center your life on Christ and let the master potter form your life into a wonderful work of art!