

“God is the Potter, we are the clay”

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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Brentwood First Presbyterian

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Introduction

Jeremiah was born and lived during one of the great political transitions in the Middle East, the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the rise of the Babylonian Empire in current day Iraq, and the destruction of Jerusalem and exportation of its leaders to Babylon.

The book of Jeremiah is a collection of Jeremiah’s speeches dictated to his scribe Baruch over a period of 40 years, from 627 BC until the second capture of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 BC. As a young boy, Jeremiah witnessed the reforms of King Josiah, and advised the last 4 kings of ancient Israel before the exile into Babylon. In today’s reading, Jeremiah hears God’s command to go to the potter’s house. And he reports to us God’s word which he hears in that potter’s house.

Scene 1 – You will hear my words in the potter’s house

We hear and see God in everyday life.

Jeremiah, like the other prophets of ancient Israel, responded to the sights and sounds of the world around them. A basket of summer fruit, a pot of boiling water, a potter’s wheel. These and other sights and sounds became for the prophets signs of the presence of God. God is not just up in heaven, but right

here among us. God speaks to us not just before we were born and not just after we die, and not even just in prayer, but all the time. Whether we are listening or not.

Two years ago, the Kekchi indigenous were building a house for their pastor in Tamariz, Guatemala. It was my first mission trip to Guatemala. I saw three of the Kekchi on the top of the structure with four triangular struts to be the support for the tin roof. They were nailing the struts to the top of the walls. I climbed up the homemade ladder, nails in mouth, to nail down the fourth strut. The Kekchi stopped what they were doing, pointed their fingers at me, and started laughing at me. I believed they were laughing at me because they knew this gringo was not going to be much help. And I certainly lived up to their expectations. The wood was mahogany, expensive here in Brentwood, but scrapwood in Guatemala. But it was as hard as concrete. My nails only went in about a quarter of an inch before they bent. After bending three nails like this, the Kekchi laughing the whole time, one of them came over waved his hand as if to say, you are not doing it right, took a nail, scratched his head, and drove the nail in cleanly with two taps. I realized now why they were laughing. I was in their world, and all my church gifts, all my medical gifts, all my organizational gifts, all my business skills, all my gifts at coaching baseball, and camping with the Boy Scouts, all of these gifts and skills were useless here.

I believe God wants us to open to the possibility that the next person whose voice we hear may be the vessel God is using to answer our deepest

questions. And I believe God also wants us to be the person who speaks God's voice. God wants us to be the vessels which carry God's message to others.

Jeremiah was a prophet. He was not a priest. There is a difference. A priest carries the people's message to God. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us Jesus is our priest. This is why we conclude our prayers by saying, "In the name of Jesus." A prophet on the other hand carries God's message to us. God wants us to be prophets. Here is how. When we prayerfully listen for God in our every day life, read scripture on our own or in a Bible study, consider what we are going to say, and say it with love. Then we also are being prophets, like Jeremiah was 2600 years ago. We are carrying God's message to others. We are God's clay vessels carrying the Water of Life to those who are thirsty. But sometimes we do not fulfill God's expectations. God wants us to be God's Water of Life that quenches thirst. Sometimes our clay vessels leak.

Scene 2 –The vessel of clay spoils

Unintended imperfections creep in. Sometimes we are influenced by culture in ways that keep us from being good vessels of God's Word. Of God's Water of Life.

It has been said that we should proclaim the Good News, using words if we have to. We do proclaim the Good News with our behavior. Sometimes we proclaim and practice a message of social Darwinism. And sometimes we practice a message of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." We practice a message of being nice to others only when we want them to do something nice for us. We practice a message of **conditional** love. Of exclusive love.

I know of an inner city Christian homeless shelter. They provide food and a warm place to sleep for the city's poor. But they will not admit anyone who smells like alcohol. They strip search the homeless, and will not even let them carry their own clothes into the shelter. They make them change into scrubs, leaving all their belongings in lockers outside their sleeping area. They make them all go to chapel before they can eat. I have talked to the homeless treated this way. They say staying there is a humiliating experience. This Christian homeless shelter had an opportunity to affirm the marginalized of our culture. To tell them that God loves them inclusively and unconditionally. They have squandered this opportunity by judging the homeless, telling them with their actions that the poor brought their homelessness upon themselves, and the homeless deserve their status.

Our clay vessel is deformed by the influence of our internal cravings, or in the case of the Christian homeless shelter, by our culture. We are not the vessel God intends. We leak. The pot will not work in its present shape. But God knows we are reformable.

Scene 3 – The potter reworks the clay

If the clay vessel will not hold water, the potter starts over.

My childhood church at one point focused on how many members they had. At that point in time, that was their only focus. How many members they had. They did not focus on enhancing worship. They did not participate in hands on mission projects. They did not visit each other when they were sick, because that was the pastor's job. They did not conduct Bible studies outside the church

building. They were unwilling to be Sunday School teachers. They did not come on Wednesday nights because they said they had a life outside of church. They did not participate in committee work. They did not go to fellowship gatherings. They did not, in response to God's grace, tithe a percentage of their earnings to the church. They were a leaky clay vessel that held no water, and as a result, the very thing upon which they focused, how many members they had, declined.

Reformed and always being reformed. The form of the vessel on the potter's wheel may be "spoiled," the substance of the vessel, its "clayness," is still good. So God is always giving us another chance. Always reforming us. The great potter's hand is always reshaping us. This is a message of redemption. God does not give up on us, leaky and deformed by culture and our internal cravings as we are. We are not intrinsically evil, but we are very malleable, like clay. We can be easily influenced by culture and our internal cravings. But there is another influence. Through reading scripture by ourselves and in Bible study, and by listening for God's word to us in prayer and in our daily lives, God reshapes us into the image of Jesus. Reshapes us so that we can carry God's message. So we can carry God's Water of Life to others without leaking. It is only when we resist God's reforming us, only when we harden ourselves against change, only then that we break. Like the imperfect vessel of clay, when we do not reflect the will of our creator, we are collapsed in order to be remade. It is redemption that speaks the final word over judgment. God's judgment is always mercy. But we WILL be made into the vessel God has intended. We will carry

God's message not just into Guatemala, not just into the soup kitchen in Downtown Presbyterian, but into Brentwood as well.

Conclusion

Driving nails into hard wood, a homeless shelter with good intentions, and life in a small church. We are not rigid and refractory to change. God is our potter. And we are clay in God's hands.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...