

GOD'S WORK OF ART Jeremiah 18:1-11

When I was in college back in the 70's, we students had a classification system about our courses. Courses were either required by our degree, electives, or "gut" courses. I don't know if this is a universal classification system but back then, a "gut" course was considered to be an "easy A" – a course that required little study and was generally to be simply enjoyed. Just out of curiosity, I googled the term 'gut course' and got the following answer: a college or university course requiring little work or intellectual ability! I guess Salve Regina College was on the cutting edge of slang terminology!!

Well, one semester I signed up for a pottery course thinking it would be fun and truly a gut course. Boy was I ever wrong. If you have never tried working at a potter's wheel you cannot possibly know the intricate technique involved in turning out a decent pot, to say nothing of a true work of art! To this day, I have absolutely zero recollection of successfully turning out any pots that would be fired in the kiln; and cannot remember for the life of me my final grade. All I know is that the work of a potter was way beyond my skill set!

A fellow United Methodist pastor serving in the North Carolina Conference posted the following from his own research of this particular passage from Jeremiah 18:1-11. "Jeremiah is told by God to "Go to the potter's house." Last time around in the lectionary cycle, I did. I visited a potter in her studio, wrote a sermon with her, and then brought the potter to my house. My sermon was a conversation with her – and in a couple of our services, she actually worked on a pot right in front of us! Listen to the following words of the potter: "The language potters use is theologically suggestive. Clay gets *spoiled*, so the potter *reworks* it. If it's *wonky*, the potter has to *redeem* it. The potter is never sure how the pot will turn out; the clay "talks back" to the potter. The clay is passive – but has its own life and nature that can resist the potter!"

"The potter strives to *open up* the clay. Keeping the clay centered is key – and two hands are required to shape, reshape, begin again, refine. The outside must conform to the inside. Hard clay is a challenge – and so the potter adds water (so can we think tears? Baptism?). The clay gets exhausted – and so is set aside for a time (can we think John Wesley's Covenant Prayer, "Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you"?). Time, patience, practice are required. The potter continually learns from each new pot. And you can't force the clay. You let the wheel do its work, its force being more pivotal than the hands, which merely shape the clay." (Rev. Dr. James Howell, Myers Park UMC. September 2, 3019)

Verses 5-6 record the "word of the LORD" that comes to the prophet as he watches the potter work. The relationship between potter and clay is now likened to that of the Lord and Israel. Both the force of divine control and the delicacy of human freedom combine in this comparison. God declares to Jeremiah – "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." Jeremiah's own observations have just witnessed that the clay may sometimes thwart the potter's original intentions. For you and me, God is the potter, we are the clay. The above metaphor shows the tension for believers who truly want God to make them and mold them into his will, but also want God to want to follow their own will. For example,

there is the well-known tongue in cheek prayer, “O God, grant me patience, but give it to me right now!”

One of the most enduring challenges for every person seeking to follow God’s will for their lives is that if we are sincere in seeking this, we can expect the master potter to reshape who we are into who He wants us to become. On the one hand this involves personal change – probably the most detested aspect in the life of any congregation I have pastored. Oh, mind you, none of us is against change... as long as it is our own idea. And this starts in all of our lives when we are still very young.

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, age 5, and Ryan, age 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. “If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’ Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, “Ryan, you be Jesus!” I think it’s safe to say that we’re all a little bit like Kevin. We want everyone else to act like Jesus. We want everyone else to be kind and giving. We want everyone else to make the sacrifices and be tolerant and forgiving of us. Unfortunately, the only person we need to be concerned about is ourselves – not in a selfish way, of course, but in the context of Matthew 7:3-5: “Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye.”

Thus, the image of the potter from our text this morning is a very intimate image portraying God’s creating work in the world. It implies that God is thinking, planning, and devising that which he wishes to create. It implies that God’s own hand is upon the creation, as the potter’s own hand shapes the clay. It implies that God’s work is as near and personal and intimate as the unseen force that shapes human tissue into a human child. The potter whom Jeremiah visits, then, is not just a craftsman forming a clay jar. His every thought, his every physical action can be interpreted as an earthly re-enactment of how God labors over his creative work in us to transform us from inert matter into valued and beautiful examples of his creative power.

On Wednesday night at the weekly Bible Study on the Gospel of John, we studied the passage where Jesus talks about being the true vine, while you and I are the branches. (John 15:1-8) Instead of being a potter in this scripture, God is the Gardener. Listen to verses 1-2 “I am the true vine,” said Jesus, “and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t bear fruit; and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it can bear more fruit.” Jesus is talking of this pruning as being an ongoing process. His disciples have already been pruned by God, but they can expect it to happen on a regular basis. Jesus had already spoken the word to them, calling them to take up their cross and follow him. They have had to submit to the pruner’s knife, cutting away other goals and ambitions. They have already borne fruit; from now on they must now expect more pruning, so that they can bear even more fruit. (N.T. Wright, John for Everyone, page 70).

When I made the decision to answer God’s call on my life by entering seminary, I pretty much turned Vern’s and my lifestyle upside down. I was 43 years old, and we had been married 13 years. I had centered my life on Vern and every farm where we lived. As a self-employed

seamstress working from home, living on the farm, I was readily available to meet Vern's immediate needs which included, making him a second breakfast when morning milking was finished; his lunch and supper and sometimes bringing him a mid-milking snack. It was not unusual for me to run errands for the farm several times a week. In between meeting my clients, sewing and taking care of our home, I had the sole responsibility of childcare when the kids were with us. I was truly a Proverbs 31 woman, and proud of it.

Suddenly, I was commuting to Harrisonburg 4 days a week – 56 miles each way for classes which sometimes lasted into the evening hours. I had homework to do, clothes to wash, meals to make and the house to clean. Matthew and Karen were grown and on their own, so it was just me, Vern and the dog. Vern's life did a 180 and he was not a happy camper – and when Daddy is not happy, ain't nobody happy. When God calls a married person into full time ministry, both husband and wife are called. Vern and I had to learn this very difficult lesson and it took the better part of three out of my four years in seminary. Vern was working on a dairy farm he loved, and he was not going to change. Seriously, there were times when I was not sure if our marriage was going to survive this call to ministry. Years later Matt and Karen shared they had the very same concern.

But. God. Is. Faithful. During one of my evening classes there had been an opening devotion focused on our marriage relationships. We were encouraged to pray for our spouses on a regular basis, and this night we were especially encouraged to do so. Well, that afternoon, just before leaving for class, Vern and I had had 'words' together – AKA an argument over all the time my classes, homework, and volunteer church responsibilities were taking away from home (meaning him). During our time of silent prayer before class where we were to pray for our spouses, my heart sank and truly in a moment of despair I said to God, "What am I going to do with Vern?" It was one of those crystal-clear moments when I heard God's answer, "You leave him to me!" I remember saying, "What???" And God said it again, "You leave him to me!"

It wasn't easy, but I did, and this freed God up to work in Vern's and my life. It was a slow process; a painfully slow process for both of us, and some day, Vern will share his story. But by the time I was getting ready to graduate Vern went from saying, "If the Bishop appoints you to a church someplace where we have to move, you are going alone," to "You have followed me for the first 17 years of marriage, I guess it is my turn to follow you!" Oh incidentally, 19 years from that first move, Vern is working on a farm in Crozet – the very same farm he was working on while I was in seminary. God. Is. Faithful!

But, back to Jeremiah... 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 – 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 – 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 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. (John Hanneman, “Shaped by an artist,” June 10, 2001)

Friends, you and I are the clay, the branches of the true vine and God is our Potter and our Gardener. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:10) Another way of saying this verse is, “We are God’s work of art.” Our self-image should be shaped by this understanding, that who we are and are becoming, our identity in Christ, is the result of God as Artist, who not only created us and endowed us with God’s image, but through the power of Christ at work within us and among us is still creating us, still making us, still forming and still reforming us, as a potter molds the clay (Isaiah 64:8).

Like Michelangelo, calling forth a figure out of stone, the Spirit of Christ, working with flesh and blood is trying to bring us to life, trying to free us from our own individual blocks of marble that imprison us. The Spirit as Artist longs to bring us to life, so that we emerge into figures, into living people, authentic human beings who will do good things in the world, people who will bring life and beauty to birth for the sake of the world, forever being and becoming people of Renaissance, of rebirth, people of Resurrection, of new life, people coming to life, giving new hope, new possibilities for this is our way of life, this is why we have received such grace. (Ken Kovacs, Homiletics Online, illustrations, 2018)

These words are indeed worth pondering. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!