

CLAY

1st Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, New York
September 8, 2013
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you call us to be your disciples, to follow you down the narrow way of faithful discipleship. Lord, give us the grace we need to risk discipleship, to discipline our lives to your will, to love you enough to serve you in all that we do or say. Teach us to listen to you more than we listen to the voices of the world. Keep us close to you in all the times of our lives. In short, help us to count the cost and to be able to pay the price. Amen.

Travel guides for tour operators like to tell the story of the polished shoes. Back when hotel guests used to put their shoes outside their door to be picked up and polished overnight, a man opened his door for his shoes the next morning and discovered one black shoe and one tan shoe.

He called down to the hotel valet and told him of the error. The valet expressed considerable astonishment. "Well, don't that beat all; I've been polishing shoes here for five years and that's never happened before til now, that's the second time this morning I've made a mistake."

We have been skillfully taught that mistakes are stupid, illogical, and shameful. Does it not then follow that our society would be experiencing a plague of self-flagellating behavior: people who cannot bear to live with the despair, self-pity, and guilt caused by the mistakes they have made - either real or imagined?

Miscalculations in our lives are cause for instant depression, self-flagellation and re-evaluations of our self-worth. This is the mistake mystique. Others can err, but we do not allow ourselves the same privilege. We hold ourselves eternally responsible for every error in life. We carry the



memory of our every mistake in a sack slung over our shoulders.¹

Several years ago in Detroit there was an exhibit of two Rembrandts. A local critic charged that one painting was not genuine. An expert, brought in for an opinion, decided that the painting in question was indeed a copy because, as he put it, "It did not have Rembrandt's mistakes."

Some of the greatest discoveries have involved mistakes. Through a mistake, Pasteur discovered the principle of vaccination, Goodyear the process of vulcanizing rubber, and Fleming the secret of penicillin.

If there is anything that bothers a pastor in the quiet moments of his study late at night, it is the replaying of the day's events. For then you ponder over the poor prioritizing of things. Visits which were not made. Words which should have been spoken but were not. Silence which should have been kept and wasn't. There is an endless sense of failure. It is often during these times that the

¹ Rabbi Daniel A. Roberts in sermon: "The Mistake Mystique".

prayers of confession for our services are written. They are often quite personal.

The good news is that God can redeem the mistakes which we make. That is not to say, that we ought to continue making them, that we shouldn't care about them. There is Biblical warrant for the view that we ought to be cautious that the divine eraser doesn't wear out ahead of the pencil. But, it is to say that when we come to worship we often arrive at church as slaves to many masters: ambition, possessions, status, power, or control. We come here to be remade. We don't always like what we see and want to be remade and recycled. And why not?

Recycling.

We do it with newspapers, bottles and cans, sometimes with old batteries and computer printer cartridges. But how about rotary-dial telephones? Not likely. Junk like that gets thrown in the trash or carted off to a museum.

If we lived in Cuba, however, the story would be different. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the economic crisis deepened. Poverty became pandemic, and Cubans were forced to engage in some truly inventive recycling. Since they had nothing new to work with, they found creative ways to make something out of nothing.

Another took an empty plastic bottle, one that used to hold antifreeze, and transformed it into a sign for his taxicab.

Still another person took a little plastic bear, a child's old squeeze toy, and attached it upside down to a set of bicycle handlebars so that it would become a bike horn.

Now that's what you call real recycling. Not simply putting old newspapers out on the curb. This is the kind of *creatio ex nihilo* reinvention

that stands as a true tribute to creativity. And there's no waste.²

It's this kind of appreciation for the recycling potential of the old, the tired, the tried and true, for which the prophet Jeremiah gained a new appreciation when God suggested he take a look at what was happening in the potter's house in Jerusalem.

The people of Israel were on a perilous path of perversity and injustice and idolatry, and Jeremiah could see that they were likewise on a collision course with judgment and exile. But as he saw what the potter was doing and pondered the conversations he was having with God in his mind, Jeremiah perceived that divine creativity might allow for a very different outcome.

"I went down to the potter's house," says Jeremiah, "and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him" (Jeremiah 18:3-4). The potter did not give up when the first vessel was spoiled, but he reworked it into something that was good and useful, like a Cuban recycler turning a phone into a fan, or a plastic bottle into a taxi sign.

Then word of the Lord was interpreted through Jeremiah: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? ... Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (v. 6). God makes it very clear that he can smash a spoiled pot and throw it in the trash, or he can recycle it into something that is good and useful and pleasing to him.

Jeremiah's perception is that God may be disappointed with our decisions, our lifestyle, and our behavior. But, God doesn't seek automatically to trash us, but to recycle us and remake us. The prophet, Jeremiah envisions God as a potter who could bring divine judgment

²This illustration used in the sermon, *Have Mine Own Way* preached September 5, 2010 in Pittsford, New York. The sermon was rooted in Jeremiah 18:1-11.

against Israel and destroy it as if it were a piece of clay that was misshapen. To this potter it appears that the recycling option is quite open at this point. “Turn now, all of you from your evil way,” says the Lord, “and amend your ways and your doings” (v. 11).

Repentance is the key — turning ourselves around, and beginning to walk in the way of the Lord. If we make a move away from sin and toward our Savior, we’ll find that God is willing to rework us into something that is remarkably fresh and creative and new. Our Lord wants to use us, not discard us. God prefers that there be no waste but that we be useable vessels filled with divine intention.

Granted, sometimes we feel like old antifreeze bottles, empty and dirty and cracked, but we don’t have to end up in the garbage. God isn’t seeking to be Lord of the Landfill, anxious to get rid of anything that is ruined, spoiled, or damaged goods. Instead, God wants to rework us, recycle us, and turn us into something that is pleasing and useful.

Jeremiah is challenging the people to make the second move. This old prophet is suggesting that God is eager to make the first move, inviting us to return to being the kind of people God wants us to be, reminding us of extending constant love, begging us to amend our ways. The burden of response is placed upon us, and in that we are different from clay.

So we need to make the second move: turn around to face the One who is eager for reconciliation. So why is this “turning-around” move such a tough one?

Part of the problem is that change is huge, Rochester, huge! Even when we know that a journey to a new moral and ethical climate would be good for us, we resist this course of action. We might want to sing the old gospel hymn, “Have Thine Own Way, Lord” we prefer Sinatra’s lyrics, “I did it my way.”

Years ago I remember a fraternity brother sharing an embarrassing moment with a number of us. He was convinced to have his own way and date a young woman who seemed to ignite his hormones. He thought that unbridled pursuit was the way to her heart and being a person who had diplomatically relied on potential and quick thinking to get himself out of most any jam, he arrived unannounced at her house, making a long trek during a school break.

She came to the door with her hair "teased" in about six million directions. This was during the days and craze of hair teasing. Somehow you got the hair somewhat knotted by use of a comb and then straightened out the hair to give it a certain fullness. Those of you who are old enough understand. At this point in the process her hair looked like she might have stuck her finger in a light socket. It was a very awkward moment.

There was nothing she could do but try to make light of the situation, so she asked, "How do you like my hair?" What is a guy to say at a time like that? Should he say something like, "I've seen a few swallows who would find it inviting." No, this creative fellow stood there for a moment and then told her with rapt, upturned eyes, "It looks as if it's about to become something wonderful."³ I thing that God sees us like that when we feel that we are nothing more than a lump of inertia laden clay.

Resistance: It’s part of the psychology of change. “All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy,” wrote the French writer Anatole France, “for what we leave behind is part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another.”

That’s why we prefer “retail therapy,” a clinical — if not more palatable — term for shopping, guilt trips as it were, because it feels good to go out and buy the latest fashion or most up-to-date electronic

³ Harold C. Bennett, Reflections on Faith (Nashville: Broadman Press), 1983.

gadget. It's hard to repent of gossip, when we are unaware that we crave it to feed our egos so that we think we are in a position of superiority, with control over a tidbit of scandalous information. It is hard to repent of gambling, because we get such an adrenaline rush from making a bet and pursuing a jackpot. It is hard to repent of addictions because of their appeal to our baser selves.

As much as we may want to make changes in these areas, we know that our repentance will leave us feeling somewhat deflated. When we turn away from sensual delights, we leave behind a part of ourselves.

In short, we don't repent, because — we don't want to, really. That's it. We don't want to, we don't feel like it. Let's admit it. Sin, rebellion, control, can be fun. We don't want to give it up. So we don't.

And in that we feel uncomfortable with what Jeremiah has to say here. We are disturbed that God appears to be fickle and can choose justice as would also be God's nature rather than grace. We prefer that God would just be permissive of our behavior and redeem us simply because it is God's pattern to be forgiving. How dare Jeremiah try and put the burden on us. We are entitled to be constantly redeemed no matter what we do.

Perhaps you remember Jayson Blair back in 2004 when he was a star *New York Times* reporter until he was charged with plagiarism and the faking of reports. In her review of his book, Julie Finnin Day wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* (March 10, 2004):

“He seems to justify many of his transgressions by blaming the culture at the Times. This is where his case grows paper thin. Blair suggests he was the victim of a reaction against affirmative action, incompetent editors, lax journalistic standards and unfair assignments...

“Blair offers this account of his rise and fall in hopes of finding redemption, or at least a second chance. But noticeably absent from his story is remorse toward the

grieving families he wrote about but never interviewed. For someone seeking a redemption, an apology would be a good place to start.”

Why did he resist this repentance move that might have changed his future?

Not only is resistance a barrier to repentance so is fear of the unknown. To do an about-face and head in a whole new direction — which is, at heart, the core meaning of repentance. What a daunting proposition is set before this ancient people, and by extension, to us.

After traveling on one path for weeks or months or years, it can be disorienting and frightening to spin around and move in a radically different direction. We have to wonder: Am I really going to enjoy living a life of simplicity after years of maxing out my credit card? Am I ever going to feel any heart-pounding excitement if I focus on service projects instead of slot machines?

Repentance is the first step in becoming a whole new creation, like a squeeze toy changing into a bicycle horn, and it's not clear from the beginning that any of us is going to enjoy the transformation. Yet, while we fear the unknown, we often come — eventually — to loathe the known. We're tired of the despair and the uselessness, tired of passing the Paxil for peace of mind, tired of living in a spider hole of meaninglessness. We're weary of our search for guiltless pleasure. We tire of our weakness; we long for redemption. We'd like a new and fresh start.

Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger would have called this the “misery index.” In his negotiations in the Middle East, he argued that people will come to the table when the cost of conflict becomes too high.

At the potter's house, we come to the table, the potter's wheel, when we understand that the cost of living our current approach, so filled as it is with ineptitude, misery and despair is too high, and that only a reworking, refashioning at the

hands of the Master Potter will work to turn our lives around.

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.

Songwriter Bill Gaither puts it this way:

Something beautiful, something good!
All my confusion He understood!
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and
strife, but He made something beautiful
out of my life!

If you don't think that God can use Jeremiah's metaphor of a potter to change things around to those who obediently let God remold them, consider this,

Noah was a drunk, Abraham was too old,
Isaac was a daydreamer, Jacob was a liar,
Leah was homely, Joseph was abused,
Moses had a stuttering problem, Gideon
was afraid, Sampson had long hair and was
a womanizer, Rahab was a prostitute,
Jeremiah and Timothy were too young,
David had an affair and was a murderer,
Elijah was suicidal, Isaiah preached naked,
Jonah ran from God, Naomi was a widow,
Job went bankrupt, John the Baptist ate
locusts and wore a scratchy shirt, Peter
denied Christ, the disciples fell asleep
while praying, Martha worried about
everything, the Samaritan woman was
divorced, more than once, Zaccheus was
too small, Paul was too religious, Timothy
had an ulcer ... AND Lazarus was dead!

In Athens, Georgia, there is 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: 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.

The story of recycling in Cuba has at least one more lesson to teach us as we ponder the work that God does in reshaping our lives.

Back in 1994, a Cuban designer named Ernesto Oroza first noticed the creative reinventions of his fellow citizens — their fans, signs, and horns — and he gave these creations a special name: "Objects of necessity." He said to *Fast Company* magazine (February 2004), "The objects of necessity represent the world I live in, and they express our desire to invent and not let ourselves be overwhelmed by our problems."

Objects of necessity? What a great term to apply to ourselves, as we see ourselves as lumps of clay in the hand of our potter God. We are the creations that God has chosen to advance divine will on earth, the clear signs of God's desire to invent new solutions to the problems that arise in the course of human history.

It really doesn't make sense for us to resist the changes that God is making as he recycles us for his purposes, because there is nothing more satisfying than being "objects of necessity," key components of our Lord's world-changing movement of love and peace and justice. When God recycles, there's never any waste. Only forgiven and reinvented people who are good and useful and pleasing both to God and to others.

SOME COMMENTARY ON JEREMIAH 18:1-11

The meaning of Jeremiah 18:1-11 hinges on the rich image of the potter as symbolic of God's creative activity in the world. A potter, or *yotzer*, is one who takes the most common, seemingly worthless element of the earth, the clay itself, and transforms it into something functional, valuable, even beautiful. The fashioning of pottery is one of the oldest achievements of human culture, and pottery is one of the first cultural materials used for artistic expression. The image of the potter, then, is one that communicates not only the physical task of crafting a ceramic vessel, but also the artistic skill and talent needed by one who would do so. Perhaps for this reason, the image of God the Creator portrayed as a potter is one of the oldest (Genesis 2:7-8, 19) and most enduring in ancient Israelite religion.

Unlike the term '*bara*' "to create" (Genesis 1:1), which is only used to describe divine activity, *yatzar*, meaning "to create," can be applied to both human and divine activity. In fact, it is applied to God more often than it is applied to humans. It describes God who "created/formed" the universe and its inhabitants (Genesis 2:7-8; 19; Psalm 33:15; 74:17; 94:9; 95:5; 104:26; Isaiah 27:11; 43:1, 7, 10, 21; 44:21; 45:7, 9, 12, 18; 64:8; Jeremiah 10:16; 51:19; Amos 4:13; 7:1; Zechariah 12:1). It is also used to describe how God takes human tissue and "shapes" or "creates" it into a person in the womb (Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:5). In fact, Jeremiah uses the term to describe his own "creation" as a prophet of God from the womb (Jeremiah 1:5). In addition to the basic meaning, however, *yatzar* is also used to describe God's devising of the cosmic plan for human history (2 Kings 19:25; Isaiah 22:11; 37:26; 46:11; Jeremiah 18:11; 33:2; Psalm 139:16).

Thus the image of the potter 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.

When Jeremiah arrives at the potter's house, verse 3 states that the potter is "working at his wheel." The Hebrew says literally "he was making a work on the stones." The pottery wheels of Iron Age Israel were not kick wheels exactly. They were two thick stone disks that sat upon each other. The bottom stone had a conical protrusion in the middle that fit into a larger conical recess in the bottom of the stone above. In this way the bottom stone stayed stationary and the top stone could be rotated either with the potter's feet or with one hand. Given the weight of the stones, making a pot required that the potter use his whole body, literally surrounding the stones and the clay with both arms and likely both feet as well. It is an image of complete physical and mental absorption in a task.

As Jeremiah watches the potter at his work, he notes that if a vessel becomes spoiled as the potter is working it, he can make it into another vessel as he sees fit. The verb used to describe the ruined vessel is *shachat*, which can mean "to be ruined, marred or spoiled," but can also mean "to be corrupted or perverted." Thus the physical meaning has an ethical parallel, making the "spoiled" vessel an ideal metaphor for "corrupted" humanity. Just as the potter may choose to reduce the spoiled vessel to its base element and start over, God may choose to destroy corrupted Israel and force them to start over in humility.

This idea, presented in brief here, is the primary message of the prophet Jeremiah to his era. He served in Jerusalem under the growing shadow of the Babylonian advance that would eventually destroy Judah. He was also, however, a descendant of the priests at Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1), formerly of Shiloh, whose corruption led to their ouster from YHWH's service and the destruction of the shrine they maintained. Because of this bitter family experience, Jeremiah continuously urged his contemporaries, who trusted too strongly in God's love for Jerusalem as his temple city, to turn from corruptions such as idolatry and child sacrifice, which had become common among them (Jeremiah 7:3-32).

Living in the shadow of the temple, he argued, was not sufficient to make one immune to God's wrath in the face of religious corruption. Only if they would turn from their evil practices would God be inclined to grant them mercy and possibly save them from the destruction that seemed virtually inevitable.

The image of the clay and the potter as a metaphor for humanity and God is not confined to Jeremiah. Isaiah uses this image as well (45:9-10). Contained in both Jeremiah's and Isaiah's use of this image, however, is the acceptance of the premise that a creation is, by definition, less powerful than its creator. This is the basis for Isaiah's critique of the religions of Mesopotamia that employed cultic statuary made by human artisans. The fact that an object is created by a human being implied that it could have no more power than a human being possessed (Isaiah 44:12-20). This premise implies for Jeremiah that the potter who makes the vessel also determines its destiny.

This creator/potter (Hebrew *yotzer*, 18:2) is also the inventor/deviser (Hebrew *yotzer*, 18:11) of human destiny. He not only shapes the vessel, he plans for its use — and can also make plans for its destruction. In other words, there is no destiny for Judah apart from that which its potter God has devised for it. If God decides that his chosen people are corrupted, he may well revise his original plan of grace for them, and determine that they need to be reduced and reworked into a new, more chastened version of themselves. He can make that decision as quickly and as easily as a potter might make the decision to cave in a crooked pot and start over again, having reduced the pot to its original lump of clay.