

JEREMIAH 18:1-11

In this week's reading of Jeremiah's story, God invites Jeremiah to enter a potter's shed and there observe the potter working with clay, so that Jeremiah may better hear God's words, understand God's way with Israel, and summon God's people to conversion.

Jeremiah must leave his own familiar spaces, step away from the scriptures and the sanctuaries, bypass the committee meetings and professional development seminars, and instead learn about God and God's people by watching an artist at work. Other scriptures invite us to imagine God as ruler and judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father, mother, and lover. Here we are invited to see God as an artisan and artist.

So, what is the purpose of prophets and prophecy? This question is at the forefront of today's reading and is explained using a metaphor of the potter's wheel. Jeremiah receives instructions to enter the potter's house where he sees the potter working at the wheel, shaping a clay vessel. Yet, the vessel that the potter was crafting became misshapen, and so the potter reworked the clay into another pot that was smooth and rightly-shaped.

Anyone who reads this part of the Book of Jeremiah and expects that words from God are always words of comfort and reassurance will have to stop and think again. This familiar passage about "The Potter and the

Clay” turns the idea of a loving God on its head. It is a vivid reminder that depending on human response, God is capable not only of intending good and evil toward humanity, but also of changing the divine mind about pending doom and blessings. One might read this passage and ask, “Where is the love?”

There are times when tough love is necessary to bring healing and reverse the effects of poor decisions, to reverse the effects of sin and evil in the world. Jeremiah’s prophecies of difficult times ahead and their fulfillment are a form of tough love. His foresight regarding arduous times ahead is a reflection of “the tension between temple theology (a theology in which bad things could not, would not happen to Israel because of the protection of God and the temple) and covenant theology (a theology of rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience; similar to retribution theology).”

For a nation that saw itself as God’s chosen people, nothing could be more upsetting than to think of the loss of God’s favour. Theologian R. E. Clements puts the matter succinctly, “Can it be thought that God would permit, let alone ordain, the destruction of Israel when they are ‘his’ people? The prophetic answer is that this can be so, as shown by the analogy of the potter beginning anew by reworking the original clay.”

In a prophetic oracle, YHWH explains that what Jeremiah has just seen is a metaphor for God’s interaction with God’s own people. The wheel of

the potter is a metaphor for YHWH's divine sovereign will, that shapes the experiences and future of the people.

Yet, the metaphor also gives room for the will of the people to shape and decide their own future as the clay. In this metaphor, God works with the clay toward a desired outcome, yet the clay may resist that shaping and so become misshapen and, ultimately, rejected and re-shaped into another vessel.

The metaphor of the potter's wheel comes in the midst of a series of prophetic pronouncements of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, and of coming disaster. Some of these oracles of judgment involve physical objects as metaphors. The imagery of the potter's wheel functions in the same way as a prophetic vision and the ruined clay as a symbol of the destruction that is to come against Judah. YHWH says that if the house of Israel "does evil in my sight" and does not obey, then it will be smashed and destroyed like the first vessel that the potter judged to be deficient and misshapen.

Yet, in the midst of these prophecies of coming destruction, there is a note of hope that is plainly stated when YHWH declares that "if a nation turns away from evil which I have proclaimed over it, then I will change my mind about the disaster which I intended to bring on it."

We might think of prophecy, generally, as an oracle of doom or a fate

already determined by God that is immovable and already-determined by God. The purpose of prophecy most frequently is to convince those receiving the prophecy to change their behaviour and to follow the commands of God by enacting justice.

Jeremiah plainly states that, if the people will follow the law of God, then the disaster will not come and the course of their future will instead be a bright one.

The specific sins of Judah and Jerusalem that are mentioned are the worship of other gods, and gaining wealth through unjust or oppressive means. These two accusations of guilt are intertwined. Earlier, Jeremiah accused Judah of becoming rich by taking the goods of others, of failing to care for those who are economically and socially vulnerable in their society, such as orphans and the poor. Since covenant law makes specific provisions for care of these individuals, abandoning the God of Israel to worship other gods likely also meant abandoning the laws of the covenant that were intended for community and individual flourishing. Living according to the law of God involves the economic well-being of those in the community as an issue of moral integrity.

It is helpful to recall that Jeremiah's ministry spanned the years just prior to, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem. The trauma of anticipating, experiencing, and acclimatising to war and its aftermath has a devastating effect, not only on the nation, but on God and the prophet

as well. The relationship between the three is so close, so intertwined that what happens to either affects them all. God is not so far removed, so aloof, so transcendent that God is unaffected by what happens in the human realm. Quite the contrary:

God not only commands, but responds to people, individuals, and nations, according to their response to the divine.

In this story, God's love is expressed in the reworking of the clay, however painful and unpleasant it might be. So, "Where is the love?" The love, as Jeremiah would later say, is ultimately a plan for good. However, Israel's decision not to worship God and to worship other gods instead leaves the nation vulnerable to heartbreaking consequences. For now, even if the effort is futile, Jeremiah must issue a clarion call for contrition.

A potter working with clay is an everyday occurrence in the ancient world. As a result of his watching a mundane task, a potter at work, Jeremiah receives God's instruction to issue a call for repentance. This call for repentance includes an unequivocal warning that the consequences for failure to honour God can be severe. The community needs to know that God's dealings with the nation are not limited to the blessings of temple theology, but extend to the consequences of covenant theology as well. In other words, God's love can be tough love. Moreover, God's tough love is applicable to any nation, Israel included. Clements discerns, "the destruction of Israel and Jerusalem is to be

understood as fully within the range of the working of divine providence.”

The biblical text makes it clear that “God will work with what is available.” Unlike people, who are likely to be in denial or optimistically overlook life’s negatives, God insists that humanity see reality: “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” The message from the potter’s house is that “God is faced with the task of working with positive and negative factors in order to shape Israel into the best vessel possible.” The message from the potter’s house is that God will not ignore Israel’s unrighteousness.

In Jeremiah we hear that God did not simply shape us once for all. To this day, God, tells Jeremiah, God’s people are like clay that has not yet been fired. As we too go down into the potter’s shed we may learn the difference between clay that has been fired and clay that not yet been fired. It is this: clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape. It may be decorative, but is often functional, and is most often designed for a single purpose - a brick or tile, bowl, or plate, a mug, a vase, a pitcher, a storage jar, a lamp. It is very easy to break. Such clay, now dry ceramic, often lovely and as often useful. It is specialized. It is also rigid and brittle. But, clay that has not been fired is pliable. It may be shaped and reshaped infinitely. It is a material of possibility: mouldable, flexible, responsive.

Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils, God did not fire the clay from which she made us. Not one of us is only a tile,

a pitcher, or a lamp. God is able to shape us and reshape us, and God labours tirelessly at the wheel on our behalf. God assesses our character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.

After Jeremiah's visit to the potter's shed, and after God explains to Jeremiah just how God is a potter and just how God's people are like clay in God's hand, whom God is able to re-form, then God changes gears and begins to talk about God's plans for nations and kingdoms. It almost seems to be a new subject, for now God is not talking about the house of Israel in particular, but rather about any nation at all.

God's plans for a nation, a people, or a kingdom, God explains, are not fixed and they are not determined apart from our own choices. On one hand, God's good plan to build up a people may be thwarted by their choice to do what is evil. On the other hand, God may plan to pull down a kingdom that has made itself great on the backs of the oppressed, but if that nation turns from its evil, God may change her mind concerning the destruction God had planned. Just as we, the unfired clay, respond to the potter's touch, to water, and to the wheel, so God responds to us.

And so we see that at the heart of this passage is the complex interaction between God the artist and maker, on one hand, and, on the other, God's people, so are like clay in God's hands, but are also so

much more. God cannot make us do anything. God cannot *make* us use our gifts or choose the good. Nor can God affect our conversion or direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose if we do not choose them as well.

We are neither automatons nor closed circuits. The shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. We remain supple. We, as individuals and as communities, may be formed through education and practice of virtue. We may be deformed through abuse and ambition. We are susceptible to influence, suggestion, temptation, and corruption. We are also resilient, and capable of astonishing goodness and true conversion. Through it all, even in the company of others and even in relationship with God, each of us forms our own intentions and exercises our own free will.

God asks Jeremiah, not commands, and even says “please” - to speak to the people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, to summon them to conversion. God has planned an end for the kingdom of Judah, but even this future is not fixed. Just as the potter returns to the wheel, so God asks the people to return - please - each one, from the evil path they have chosen, and to make their paths and their deeds good.

So, Jeremiah appeals to the people to change their ways and to return to YHWH. The purpose of the prophetic pronouncement is to bring about change, to restore justice, so that a bright future might arrive rather than

the dark one that is looming on the horizon. The purpose of prophecy, here, is to avert disaster, and the prophetic pronouncement is an invitation for the people to change God's mind so that blessing might rain down on them.

God and Jeremiah want the nation to see that repentance, and only repentance, could prevent the consequences of its detrimental communal choices. Only repentance can halt its self-destructive path. Yet, even now, Israel's "future is still somewhat open, awaiting a repentant response."

Although the rest of Israel's story includes war and exile, Jeremiah's story of the potter and the clay leaves open the possibility that things could go either way. Even with all of the negatives on the horizon, Jeremiah's prophecy of disaster contains a "positive message of hope indicating that God could begin to fashion his people Israel anew."

This glimmer of hope, however faint, that no matter how bad things get, the possibility for good remains, is the reason why for generations people return to Jeremiah and his story of the potter and the clay.

What would Jeremiah say to us today. How can we reshape the potter's vessel, the clay? What does reshaping mean for individuals? Churches? Communities? Nations? The first step when we want God to reshape us is to identify and accept that we are misshapen clay that is need of the

Potter to reshape us.

As individuals needing reshaping we need to admit that we have turned from God, worshipping other gods: drugs, alcohol, money, possessions, gambling. We need to ask the Potter to reshape us. The Potter doesn't force us to make this choice ... It's all our decision and free will which God has given us.

How have churches done evil in God's sights? They have disrespected the rights of our Indigenous siblings by setting up Residential Schools and forcefully removing children from their families. Many churches were slow to stand up for racism, whether it was our black or Indigenous siblings. Churches caused much pain to our LGBTQIA2S+ children of God. Some have repented and acknowledged that evil was done in God's sight, and continue to work on reconciliation. With prayer, our Potter can reshape us.

Our communities have also done evil in God's eyes. They often blame rather than show compassion for the addict, the unhoused the abused. Reshaping can start by asking the Potter to reshape our hearts which will lead to safe homes and support for abused women and children, support for CLWR, Doctors without Borders, HIV/AIDS orphans, and the many refugees here and around the world.

How have nations done evil in God's eyes? As colonizers they took land

forcefully from the Indigenous Nations. Governments were also complicit in setting up and supporting Residential schools and removing children from their families. This wrong has been acknowledged and with the Potter's help, nations can also be remoulded.

We have a loving God who is more than willing to reshape and remould us. We just need to admit our wrongs, ask for repentance and ask our Potter to reshape us, so we can change our behaviour and follow the commands of God by enacting justice for all God's children and not be tempted to follow false gods who always beckon us to do evil in God's eyes. May we stay pliant so that the Potter can always reshape us.

Amen.