

Like the Potter's Clay

Is there any more tender image than a potter working on a wheel with a lump of clay? I have never thrown a pot myself (at least not in the technical sense of the expression; I threw a pot from the top of the Ad Building at Bethel College once ☺), but I love watching others do it. Especially when they know what they are doing. There is this intimate connection—I want to say, a symbiotic connection—between the clay and the hands of the potter. There's never any question who is in charge. And yet there is a give and take, as if both are continually responding to the other.

I'd like to be a lump of clay on Tom Unzicker's wheel! I'd like to be a lump of clay on God's wheel. I am a lump of clay on God's wheel. So are each of you. And I praise God that she is not done with me yet. In truth, there have been times when it has felt like God has started almost completely over with me.

What is most striking about this story from the prophet Jeremiah is that he is talking about us not as individuals, but as a nation. Of course God lovingly works with each one of us, like a potter working with a lump of clay, smoothing the bumps, making sure we're thick enough and strong enough in the right places, making each one of us unique.

But God has a special design for us as a people. Just as he had for the nation of Israel.

As a potter carefully chooses a lump of clay, God carefully chose the children of Israel, to be his people, his vessel, his container for the life-giving water she wants to share with the wider, watching world. It's a precious privilege, isn't it, to be a vessel for God's life-giving water. Makes us want to be the best vessel we can be. It's extra special if we are unique and beautiful to the eye. But what's most important is that we simply be able to hold the water. That there be no holes, or cracks. That we be strong enough, trustworthy enough.

Jeremiah watched as the potter worked at his wheel. And as he watched, suddenly the vessel he was making was spoiled in the potter's hand. Maybe it collapsed, like Tom's did. Got too thin or unstable. Maybe there was an air bubble in the clay that needed to come out.

Last week I preached from Jeremiah 2. God was speaking to the people through the prophet, telling them how disappointed and hurt and put out he was. Because after all God had done for them—bringing them out of Egypt, leading them through the wild wilderness, leading them to the promised land—as soon as they had entered that land, they had turned away from God, and had begun worshipping other gods. Worthless gods. Gods that were no gods. As soon as they entered that land they had basically said, “Thanks God, we got it from here. We'll call you if we need you. But don't call us; we'll call you.” Do you remember what happened? Instead of staying with God's fountain of living water, they had dug for themselves cisterns, which instead of holding living water, could only hold rainwater. And their cisterns soon became cracked. So that even the rainwater leaked out, and was lost. And we were left to wonder: once a cistern develops a crack, can it even be repaired? It is completely and permanently useless? Once a nation loses its way, can it ever be found again?

I spent some time talking last Sunday about ways in which our own nation has lost its way throughout its history. It didn't take us very long. First, we stole much of our land from its original occupants. Next we imported people from far away countries to serve as our slaves. Today we continue to kick out immigrants whom we don't like, because we want all the land for ourselves. We are a cracked cistern, that can hold no water. We have completely lost our usefulness.

But hold on. Today we find we are a vessel on the potter's wheel. Yes, we have some flaws. We may even have become completely spoiled and useless. But what's different today is that God can start over with us. It's not too late. In fact, it's never too late. God can patiently, carefully, tenderly reshape us, from the bottom up, as seems good to him.

In what ways does this metaphor fit our nation today? In what ways do we continue to defile the land, by worshipping false idols, which turn out to be our very selves, turned away from the God who created us? In what ways does God need to reshape us, or perhaps even start over? And what is our responsibility? Do we just sit there, like a lifeless lump of clay? Or do we participate in our own reshaping?

In what ways does this metaphor fit our denomination today? Where have we lost our way? I thank God that she is not done with us yet, that he is still, patiently, persistently shaping us to be a vessel worthy of holding God's living water.

Finally, in what ways does this metaphor fit our church, by which I mean the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church? Personally, I think we have done a pretty good job of holding God's water throughout the decades of our history. But clay can dry out, become cracked. We can spread ourselves out too thin, until we collapse under our own weight.

May we continue to allow God to reshape us, as individual vessels, and as God's church. May we sit patiently on the potter's wheel, allowing God's hands to reform us, as seems good to him. May we repent, turn around and amend our ways, where they need to be amended. And may we faithfully, successfully, usefully carry God's living water out into the world.

Amen.