



On the Potter's Wheel

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Luke 13: 31-35

Feb. 28, 2010

Long before Jesus spoke his parables to bring lofty spiritual ideals to an understandable, earthy level that people could wrap their minds around, The Lord God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah. “Come,” the Lord beckoned, “Go down to the potter’s house. “ Now, I imagine that in the time of Jeremiah, every listener would have been to a potter’s house. Far before the days of Le Creuset and Calphalon, there was the local potter. Not a thing would have been cooked or stored without the everyday use of pottery. So, to use the metaphor of clay on the potter’s wheel for Israel’s relation to God—well, perhaps there would have been no more concrete way of bringing the message home to those who needed to listen.

Jeremiah was called as prophet to a people who were coming to grips with Babylon’s three invasions of Judah, and the exile of their people away from their home and away from their temple in Jerusalem, which had been left in ruins. Like groups of people throughout history that have endured a military or natural disaster, the people of Judah were left sitting by the waters of Babylon, wondering: did God forget us? How could God allow such devastation? Were the Babylonian gods more powerful than Ha

Shem, the Lord? Was the covenant brokered at Mount Sinai no longer valid? Did the survivors have a future? If so, what would it look like?¹²

Jeremiah sees the potter at the wheel. He sees the vessel the potter was making of clay become spoiled in the potter's hand. And the potter reworked it into something new, as seemed good to him.

That's what you're like! is God's message. God means this message on a grand scale, for all of the people Israel. Even when you crumble in my hand, O Israel, stay with me. For in me you will also find your restoration. I believe this Lent we can follow this message in a personal way as well.

This Lent, our church is adding a dimension to FUSH—our high school youth group. Pennie Ebsen and Emory Mead are leading it. Each Monday in Lent, one or both of them teaches one art technique. Then, as a group we read the scripture for worship the coming Sunday. After the reading, we explore the scripture and how it comes alive through the medium of art.

What better way to immerse ourselves in the understanding of the Jeremiah passage, than to go to a real potter's studio, roll up our sleeves, and begin with a lump of clay?

A few youth had taken pottery before at the high school, but most of us were pretty inexperienced in the art of wheel throwing. We learned quickly that one of the most important things we could do as potters was to **center our clay** before we begin—otherwise, in only a matter of seconds our clay would become lopsided and

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² Kathleen O'Connor posed these questions in the "Jeremiah Introduction" of The New Interpreter's Study Bible, p. 1051

collapse. Ritchie found how important the center was when his fell out.

You have to know what to do when you fail. Mahala Miller was already trained and talented in pottery. She was making for herself a lovely vase. Everything was perfectly formed... Until the walls were thin enough that the small wooden splinter could be felt. That tiny piece of wood rendered the pot useless. It collapsed beneath her hands, and she had to start again. It always comforts me to think that if God is in the position of potter, even God fails and must start over from time to time. Sometimes, when the clay failed in our hands we could cut off a lopsided top; we could use water to massage the clay back into the position we wanted it; or we could change the direction of what we wanted—a vase becomes a bowl; a bowl becomes a plate. But sometimes, as was the case with Mahala, we would just have to recycle the clay and start fresh again. That was okay too; Pennie the art teacher told us that even when we fail, we learn.

You have to keep the wheel spinning. For those of us just learning, it was tempting to just stop the wheel and force the clay into the configuration we desired. But nothing was so effective as letting the wheel take the clay where it needed to go. Our hands needed only to apply a little pressure. The spinning wheel would even out every touch.

You have to know when to stop. With the help of Pennie and also some more experienced students, I fashioned for myself a serviceable bowl. The wall was a little thick. The shape was not that interesting. But it would fire without exploding, and it would have been just the right size for a bowl of rice. Still, I wanted to see if I could make it taller—a vase perhaps, instead of a bowl. I dipped my hands in water, and put pressure on the inside and outside as

the wheel spun. My bowl grew into its own Tower of Babel—and then, it met the same fate as the Tower of Babel; it collapsed beneath my own hopes for its glory.

We have all had times in our lives that have been deeply formative. To use the potter's analogy, these are the times when we are on the wheel and a particularly unique texture appears, or a shape transforms from ordinary to exquisite. I think I've told this congregation before that one of my most formative experiences was a study abroad semester I spent in China during college.

In Beijing, I went out every day to practice my Chinese with locals. Being a beginner, I sometimes failed with the language and got myself in trouble. There was the time I thought a young man was asking me to join him in a restaurant—fandian—when really he was trying to invite me to his hotel—fangjian! But even after very embarrassing failures, each day I continued to leave the campus eager to learn something new.

There were days in China when I ached from loneliness. It was not so much the sensory overload of strange, new sights, sounds and smells every day. It was the fact that I came with no one who knew my full story—you know those people, who know you so well that you never have to tell the background story to any new encounter, because they already know it. There were nights that I was so lonely, I cried myself to sleep.

But in a way, that was freeing too. I had no assigned roles for myself. Each day became an adventure holding challenge and possibility for growth. I learned to build new friendships across cultural differences, rather than expect to gravitate towards friends because we share so much in common. I learned how to be

comfortable being different, as the foreigner. That cognitive experience helped me later as I began the coming out process, and shed the privilege of an assumed majority.

And I look forward to opportunities to be formed by coming experiences, such as the March visit to Washington DC for Ecumenical Advocacy Days, and a July delegation to Colombia, South America. On both trips, I expect I will be shaped by stories of people who have been displaced and oppressed in their countries. I recognize that I, as a white US citizen who has voice, am a vessel of power. Once these stories become my stories, I can use that power to help lead towards transformation. I hope many in the church will walk with me, whether you advocate in DC and Colombia, or join in advocacy efforts from home.

So this Lenten season, let us remember to **Center ourselves**. Find a regular activity that brings you balance. It might be as simple as taking a few minutes to breathe before you let your kids or your spouse know what they have done wrong today. The words may come out differently if you take the time to center yourself.

Know what to do when we fail. We will fail. We do sin. Even as we follow this lovely imagery of the potter helping to bring forth the beauty of the clay, let us not forget that in Jeremiah God is clearly calling Israel to turn from its wrongdoing. The people needed to take responsibility for why their nation failed, if they ever hoped to be rebuilt. Turn back from your evil ways, God urges. Sin is not a word we gladly claim in life around the church. It comes up in the prayer of confession, but I rarely hear it spoken in the walls of this church otherwise. But in the penitent season of Lent, we are made to confront our sin. Whether our sin is like a tiny splinter that makes a major crack in the clay, or whether it is the major crack that might be smoothed over with a bit of water, touch and a spin of the wheel, we are invited to open our eyes and just look with a bit of

honesty at what has caused brokenness in our relation to God and in our relation to our neighbor.

Stay on the wheel. We need not fear the turning of the wheel. In fact, we can give in to it. A Taoist story tells of an old man who accidentally fell into the river rapids leading to a high and dangerous waterfall. Onlookers feared for his life. Miraculously, he came out alive and unharmed downstream at the bottom of the falls. People asked him how he managed to survive. "I accommodated myself to the water, not the water to me. Without thinking, I allowed myself to be shaped by it. Plunging into the swirl, I came out with the swirl. This is how I survived."³

Jesus knew there was no going backwards on the potter's wheel. Everything had already been set in motion. Jesus' teachings had not just threatened the religious minded. Jesus had threatened the whole notion of empire. We have been studying this very issue in our Weekday Bible Study on Jesus. Jesus stood on the matrix of religious and political power. Herod Antipas needed internal Jewish approval and external Roman appointment.⁴ Jesus threatened both, and we see in the gospel reading today that Herod wanted to kill Jesus. Though Jesus knew his challenge to empire and to religion could cost his life, he did not stop the wheel from spinning.

Know when to stop. Find Sabbath time during Lent. Clear a space where it is only you and God. Do not heap expectations upon yourself. Let it be enough that you are here, and you are breathing, and God is here, and God's Spirit and breath is in you. Pray too that we as a country know when to stop. Stop the militarism. Stop or at least slow down the consumption of non-renewable resources. Stop the global one-upmanship that only breeds more hostility and suspicion, rather than broker peace.

³ I could not track the source to this story but heard it at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg: First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom of God Living the Questions Bible Study

And here we find ourselves, with the wheel spinning, propelling us through Lent. May we be attentive to how we form our lives in the process, and open to how God might form us. If—no—when—we find sin in us, may we have the courage to keep turning on the wheel, allowing God with a gentle hand to smooth over it—or even, if needed, to start again with us as God has done so many times before with God’s people. We know that with God, an ending is only a beginning of what yet may be.

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