

Sermon: In the Potter's Hand

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The metaphor of clay in the potter's hand is rich in imageries. The word "potter" in Hebrew is derived from the verb *yatsar*, that is "to form", "to fashion", or "to create". So a potter is someone who takes clay as raw materials, and shapes it into a desired vessel. A potter creates form out of formlessness.

The art of making pottery existed very early on in the history of humanity. It is a simple craft with basic principle that has not changed much. The pottery wheel, in its most primitive design, is constructed by joining two flat stones with a pivot at the middle. When the pivot is well balanced and well oiled, one can easily spin the top stone to provide a stable rotating surface for the clay to stand on.

Clay is a fairly common material that can be found in the earth. With the right amount of moisture added, it could be easily bended, molded, and shaped. When the wet clay is properly fashioned into a desired shape, be it a cup, a plate, or other vessels, it is then sent into an oven to be baked. Once it is baked, it becomes rigid and brittle. It remains in the same shape for hundreds, even thousands of years, never to be altered, except when it is broken.

The beauty of the Old Testament, and Prophetic literature in particular, is that it often uses common and simple to understand metaphor to describe complex relationships. In today's Scripture passage of Jeremiah 18: 1-10, God is the potter, we are the clay. God shapes us and forms us in the beginning, and God continues to reshape us and reform us as God sees fit.

We are all in God's hands.

But how does the potter shapes the clay? I still recall the one and only time that I had sat behind a pottery wheel a few years ago. Daisy and I were visiting Taiwan, sort of reconnecting with our roots. We rented a car, drove around the island, stayed at bed & breakfasts, ate delicious meals and really had a wonderful time. At one particular bed & breakfast, the

proprietor was an expert potter. He ran a studio offering workshops to visitors on the art of pottery making. So Daisy and I thought we give it a try.

Now Daisy had worked behind a pottery wheel before, in her days as a student artist. So she was quite capable, quickly shaping her lump of clay into form. I, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. I thought it was going to be a piece of cake, but instead, I was making quite a fool of myself. That lump of clay on my wheel simply would not stay in place, it was twisting out of shape and flying everywhere. I couldn't keep it in place, no matter how hard I tried. I think that master potter eventually took over, kicked me out on to the sideline, as I was consigned to simply watch him making pottery.

Making pottery is a very intimate process. The hands of the potter need to be in constant contact with the clay, feeling the softness, the wetness, and the bumps along the contour. As the wheel spins, the potter then applies pressure to the clay, just the right amount, not too strong nor too soft, to smooth out these bumps.

However, from time to time as Jeremiah himself witnessed in verse 4, the clay becomes spoiled, and the potter would rework it into another kind of vessel. The passage does not explain why and how the clay becomes spoiled. Perhaps the potter intends it. The verbal tense in Hebrew indicates that such reworking is a repeated process. I think we should all be thankful that it is a repeated process because none of us are perfect—as individuals or as the church. We are all work in progress. I couldn't agree more with the bumper sticker that says, "Be patient, because God isn't finished with me yet."

We are still in God's hands.

The metaphor of potter and clay is powerful one, yet it can lead to various different interpretations. Here from verse 5-10, God revealed to Jeremiah the principle of interpreting this particular metaphor. Two conditional sentence structures lay down two possibilities.

In verses 7-8 God stated, "*at one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.*" In verse 9-10 God continues, "*and at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my*

sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.” In both possibilities concerning the nation or the kingdom that God had previously spoken about, their actions determine God subsequent reaction. In a real sense, the clay gets a say in how the potter reshape and reform it.

God can and does change his mind, even as we remain in God’s hands.

The changeability of God is troubling to some. We often come to see God as immovable and immutable. In a world that is constantly changing, we prefer our God to be a rock, perfect beyond change. But such philosophical understanding of God is not consistent with how God reveals himself in the Scripture. Throughout the Old and the New Testaments, we read about how God is moved by compassion and by love. One of the better-known examples is how God changed his mind concerning the people of Nineveh in the book of Jonah. Repentance is often the key in appeasing God’s anger and in reversing God’s previous declaration of punishment, for our God is indeed gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. And we should take joy in the fact that it is never too late to repent.

It is good to be in God’s hands.

The reading from the book of Philemon contains a real-life example of how two people were remolded, and their relationship reshaped by God through the work of Apostle Paul. Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his master Philemon. Both became disciples of Jesus, followers of the Way through the missionary work of Paul. Onesimus came to serve Paul when he was in jail, and had become almost indispensable to the apostle, to the point of referring to him ‘like a son’.

However, Paul understood the law of the day under the Roman Empire, giving Philemon the right to put Onesimus, his wayward slave, to death. Knowing that such a broken relationship cannot be simply left alone, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, along with this letter, urging Philemon to receive back, “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...”

Note Paul stressed that he wish Philemon would do this voluntarily, not being forced. Even going so far in stating, “If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.” (v.18-19). But of course, Paul also reminded Philemon not to forget “your owing me even your own self.” It was a thoughtful and masterful way to reconcile a broken relationship in an oppressive system, signifying that shalom, the peace of God, can be a lived reality, not just something to hope for in the far future.

The hands of God shape and mold us for our own good.

As we gather in worship today, the Christian church is in a precarious state. Sunday attendance number across the Presbytery of Ottawa indicates a 40% drop in the past two decades. This narrative of longterm decline of the Christian faith continues, exasperated by the pandemic, and certainly not helped by stories of past abuses that indigenous people suffered under the church. These are serious sins that the church have repented. But serious work remains to truly repair that broken relationship.

Nevertheless, we as the community of faith trust that we are still in God’s hands. The passage of Jeremiah 18 is a good reminder for all of us. We are cautioned not to become like dry clay, un-bendable, un-reformable, but breakable. We are cautioned not to become like the Israelites, holding on to a particular theological doctrine so much so that we forget to listen to the living Word of the living God.

Part of our Christian heritage lies in the tradition of the Reformation. The Roman Catholics pride themselves in having an uninterrupted line of popes, tracing back all the way to Saint Peter himself. The Eastern Orthodox prides itself in having a divine liturgy that is unaltered for close to two thousand years. But our reforming tradition prides itself in ‘always reforming according to the Scripture’. So as we keep ourselves wet and mouldable, let us all accept with joy that ultimately God is our potter. Ultimately God shapes us and mold us. From time to time, God may find it necessary to start over, but he will never discard us.

We rejoice to be in God’s good hands.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.