

Date: September 5, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 23

SERMON: Clay in the Potter's Hands

Text(s): Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

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In our house we have a fair number of interesting pieces of pottery, both sitting around as decoration, and also in use in various ways. Some of those pieces we've collected from various countries in our travels, but most of them are the work of one of our dearest friends, who is a well-known potter in the New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York tri-state area. One of the reasons for her success as a potter, and she is very successful, is that she not only makes things of beauty, using unusual colors and materials, but also because she makes things that people can actually use in their houses every day, like the clock on my study wall or the coffee mugs Carol and I have been drinking from every morning for years. It's the combination of beauty and utility that makes her work distinctive.

I've watched Marsha at work in her studio, doing all the various things she does to her pieces at the various stages of their development. But for me, still the most interesting and enjoyable part is watching her shaping the clay on her wheel. Some finger pressure here or a pointed stick there, and suddenly that shapeless lump of clay begins to spiral into various interesting shapes. It's exciting to see something recognizable emerge from shapeless clay. But I've also seen what she does when what is emerging from the clay doesn't meet her own expectations. She unceremoniously flattens that emerging bowl or vase into a shapeless lump again, and starts over. She's not at all sentimental about that lump of clay. It's there to be molded into the thing she's envisioned in her mind's eye, and if it doesn't conform to that vision, it never makes it to the kiln to be fired and hardened into permanence. It goes back to a lump, with no trace left behind of what it started out to be.

The prophet Jeremiah, as he brooded over

the calamities that his nation was suffering, and the even worse calamity of conquest by foreign empires that loomed on the horizon as the result of the political folly of the nation's leaders, took inspiration from watching a potter at work on his wheel. Israel, he saw, was like a lump of clay on the wheel of God the master potter. In the case of a human potter, it's usually a mistake that the potter makes that results in the clay not conforming to his vision. But in the case of Israel, says Jeremiah, the fault is in the clay itself. It is rebellious clay. It doesn't give itself over to the hands of the potter, to the shaping pressure of the potter's fingers. This lump of clay has a mind and will of its own which is often at variance with that of the potter. It tries to shape itself, and so no one should be surprised when the potter flattens this rebellious clay back into a lump and starts over again. The potter doesn't do this out of anger at the clay; rather, the potter will not be satisfied until he has created a piece of rare beauty and utility, so he will be patient and persistent, destroying and reworking as many times as is necessary until the clay takes on the shape he intends it to have.

"Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 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. . . Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way and amend your ways and your doings."

Over the centuries, many Christians have read these words and pondered on them, and often have applied them in very personal and individual ways. We envision ourselves as this lump of clay in the hands of the master potter, and we hear the call to allow God to shape us and mold us into what he wants us, as individuals, to be. An old hymn I remember singing frequently in church as a child was *"Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way,*

*Thou art the potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.”*

There's nothing wrong with using the analogy of a potter and the clay in such a personal and individualized sense; in fact, seeing ourselves as clay yielding itself to the potter's shaping hands can be a very helpful and powerful path to spiritual growth. But we have to be clear that such a personal and individual use of that analogy is not what Jeremiah is talking about. He's not leading a spiritual retreat for individuals who are interested in personal spiritual growth. He's a prophet, not a spiritual advisor. He's speaking to a nation—a people that understands itself to be God's own people, and his word is a very public word.

And he's very clear about what it is God's people are doing, as a people, as a community, that is hindering God's purposes for them. Injustice and lack of hospitality to foreigners, orphans, widows, the killing of innocents, and the worship of false gods are the things that will cause the master potter to flatten the lump of clay and begin again.

In Jeremiah's day, it was immigrants or resident aliens, orphans, and widows who were the excluded ones. They were “the others” who did not belong, who had no place in Israelite culture or society, and so were either ignored, or worse, harassed or driven away. These people on the margins of society are the people for whom God has a special concern and care, he declares, and therefore, God's people must have that same concern and care for them too. To be a vessel that meets the potter's approval, we have to fit the image in the potter's mind. And that image, if Jeremiah is to be believed, is the image of a society where justice is done and seen to be done, where social and political institutions are structured not according to the bottom line of profit or nationalism or tribalism or ethnic pride, but to the bottom line of compassion and the

common good, where the foreigner and the marginalized persons who have no place are welcomed and given a place among the people of God. It is a non-violent society where innocent bystanders are not targets of groups with a political or religious agenda. In short, it is a society that is humane.

Jeremiah spells out very concretely what changes must take place in the communal life of those who understand themselves to be clay in the hands of the potter. He warned that if they did not “amend their ways and their doings,” God would flatten them back to a lump and start over. That same phrase, “amend your ways and your doings” occurs no fewer than four times in this book, and its meaning is always spelled out in very specific terms: *“For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors.”* (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

The warning against the worship of false gods is in the same sentence as the warnings against injustice. This linkage is not accidental. We always bear the image of that which we worship. Our lives and our social order always testify to our vision of that to which we ascribe ultimate worth, for that's what worship means: to ascribe ultimate worth to something. What or whom we worship determines the kind of persons and society we become.

If I were to begin clapping my hands at two-second intervals. . . every time my hands come together, five children will die of hunger in places like Darfur in Sudan and other places where bad government, political instability, or natural disasters conspire to deprive people of food and cause disease to flourish.

Yet, how many minutes on our evening news broadcasts are devoted to informing us

about tragedies like that taking place in Darfur compared with how many minutes are devoted to detailing whether the Dow Jones is up or down, and which companies are meeting quarterly earnings expectations or how the Red Sox or the Patriots are doing? And what might that tell us about which gods command our allegiance?

Does it seem to you, as it does to me, somewhat strange, or even a little spooky that this text, which comes around every three years in the cycle of the Common Lectionary, comes to us in an election year, when the political, religious, and philosophical divisions in our country are as deep, at least in the views of some commentators, as any that have existed since the Civil War— differences both in our visions of where we're going and how we're going to get there.

This text doesn't speak to the "how," but it's very clear about the "where." There is ample room for differences in political philosophy with regard to *how* we can make our society more humane, more equitable, more compassionate. But it does insist *that* a just and humane and compassionate society is the vision of the Master Potter. Neither Jeremiah nor Jesus, in our Gospel lesson gives us the option of creating a just and hospitable society or not. As Christians, we may disagree philosophically and practically about the best way to achieve this goal, but we cannot allow our differences in political philosophy to obscure the goal itself or detract our efforts to reach it. If we ever hope to be anything but a flattened lump on the wheel of history, if we hope to become vessels of beauty and utility, then we have to yield ourselves to the Potter whose vision for human society is unambiguous and specific— a society where everyone has a place at the table.

This text forces us to consider where we as the people of God are, or ought to be, focusing our concern and energy. Perhaps our anxieties about global terrorism ought to cause us to look beyond the immediate impact on our investment portfolios and our own personal safety to the

larger and more fundamental commitments that we would have to make in order to eradicate conditions where perpetual poverty, perpetual inequities, perpetual violence and political domination create the soil in which terrorism breeds. Certainly after the tragedy of the massacre of more than 300 teachers, parents, and children in Russia this past week, we are all too aware that no individual or nation anywhere is safe from ethnic or tribal rivalries or religious extremism run amok. I certainly don't have all the answers to the world's ills, but I'm fairly certain that neither Wall Street nor Madison Avenue nor the Pentagon have them either. I'm also fairly certain that both individually and collectively, we could find those answers if we took seriously the voices, like Jeremiah's, that have sounded, and are sounding, the notes of both warning and grace.

And there is grace in Jeremiah's warning. The word from God is not only "If you do not turn from your evil, I will flatten you into a lump and start over." The word from God is also, "If you amend your ways and doings, I will build you up and plant you." The potter may flatten the lump of clay, but he doesn't throw it in the trash. He patiently, with care and with love, begins to refashion it into a vessel fit for use.

Such radical repentance, radical shifts in priorities are not easy to make, whether for individuals or for whole communities or societies. That's why Jesus' words in our gospel lesson sound so harsh and unyielding. "*If you don't pick up your cross, and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. . . If you don't give up all your possessions, you cannot be my disciple.*"

Well, they are unyielding; I suppose that's why Jesus has so few real followers. Crosses are not exactly the most popular item in the marketplace these days, except for the kind that you can wear around your neck on a little gold chain.

No, I don't suspect that the world will

beat a path to the door of the cross factory; the world *is* the cross factory. But then the greatest social reforms, the greatest advances from brutishness to humane life have never begun as great mass movements, never led by politicians or political parties or corporations; they've always begun with one person or two or three or a congregation. These few model an alternative for the rest of us; they put flesh and blood on abstract concepts such as justice or equality or freedom. In the microcosm of their small community, they model a way of life that the larger society can see, and in which it can find hope. In their lives, we see what truly humane life looks like, and we see that it's possible for all the rest of us as well.

That's the mission of the church— to be that small society in which the vision of the the Master Potter becomes visible and becomes the model for the larger society around us.

But it's not easy to resist the pressures of popular opinion, local customs, media marketing and political agendas that are always trying to re-make the world in their own image. That's why we need each other; why we, in order to truly be the church, must be a community of mutual support, mutual encouragement, mutual accountability. We must be a community that, in John Wesley's words, "watches over one another's souls in love."

We have a long way to go, with many flattenings and re-shapings on the potter's wheel, many crosses to be borne and many sacrifices to be made before we become the vessels of rare beauty and usefulness that we were created to be. But that day will come if we pray and sing and work and encourage and love one another and practice living justly. By our faithfulness, we will hasten that day's appearing and be signs of hope to those who long for it. The table around which we gather to recall God's total commitment to us will be a sign of hope, a foretaste of that greater Table around which all nations will one day gather, and where earth's

deep hunger and thirst for justice and freedom will at long last be satisfied.