

Shaped By God
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Jeremiah 18:1-11
September 8, 2019 Season of Creation

Last week we visited Gary's sister and her husband for a couple of days. Elizabeth is a potter, and I always enjoy seeing what she is working on. This time it was two pitchers. She had thrown the basic vessels before we arrived, and then she shaped the spout and the place where she would later attach the handle on each of them. The next time we checked on her progress, the handles were formed and needed some time to dry out a bit before they could be attached to the pitchers themselves. I was glad that she was happy with her work, because I had been there when something went awry and she had crushed the nascent pot and tossed it into a bucket with other clumps of clay. It was shocking to see something that looked beautiful to me, something that seemed to have real possibilities, crushed and tossed aside. I am so geared to save whatever I can, to fix anything that is broken, that we have quite a few things sitting on the workbench in our basement waiting for a miracle of repair. But not everything is fixable; at least not in the ways we might want or hope.

The first time I saw a potter crush a pot in its early stages of development was several years ago when I was visiting another potter. I asked her about it. "Couldn't the pot be saved? Wasn't there any way to fix it rather than squishing it down and starting all over again?" She laughed at my shocked face and my rather intense questioning. Then she told me that when the clay you start with has not been set properly on the wheel, when it is off center even by a little bit, then it is impossible to form a good pot. It is best to start all over right then and there because you will never be able to get it to work if it has not been centered to begin with.

I remember this lesson whenever I read this passage in Jeremiah where the potter is doing just that – crushing a pot that was not centered and starting all over again. It is a hard lesson for us to take, especially those of us who are not potters and aren't used to it. But it is an important lesson that has a valuable message for us. In this life of faith there is really no room for complacency. We cannot lower *our* standards because God certainly will not. God expects us to reflect our faith in absolutely everything we do. We are not meant to be Sunday Christians only, but rather people who strive to follow Jesus every single day of the week in all that we do. The simple truth is that the people Jeremiah was preaching to were not doing this. They were not living as people of faith, but were just doing what they had to do to keep up appearances. The teachings from Deuteronomy tell a similar tale about people who did not seem to be aware that every choice they made either aligned with God's ways or it did not. There are no gray areas. "*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.*" Choosing life and prosperity means choosing to follow God's teachings, to walk the path of faith as best one can. I think the example of the potter is one that can be disturbing to us, especially if we imagine ourselves to be in the potter's hands, getting crushed down and reformed. But this is really not meant to be a punishment as much as it is meant to be a *correction* that helps us get on the path of life and prosperity once again; the path that we were created to walk.

Psalms 139 says, "*You are fearfully and wonderfully made*", but do we really believe this truth about ourselves? So often we put ourselves down, focusing on the things we feel are wrong about us rather than concentrating on the positives. "I'm too fat", "I can't manage money", "I can't kick this habit" or "I'm just so stupid." Reading Jeremiah can bring us right back to thinking badly about ourselves too, if we lose sight of the true *intention* of the message. The intention is not to say that we are terrible people who cannot possibly do anything right, or that we have messed up so badly that we can't hope to ever get back

on the right path. God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house because watching the potter work with clay, shaping his pots, was a wonderful example of how God works with us. God patiently starts over with us, from scratch if need be, time and time again, as often as we need it, until we finally reflect the image of our Creator in all that we do... at least to the best of our abilities. I don't think God is expecting perfection, but I do believe that God counts on each of us to do the very best we can with the human clay that we are.

I love that the scripture talks about us being made of clay and we also know that clay is an element of the earth, so in some ways we are very closely connected to and even related to the earth. *A few years ago I spent a few days learning about making pots with master potter Felipe Ortega in New Mexico. A Jicarilla Apache by birth, Felipe told us about the ceremony and ritual surrounding the actual making of pots before we started. The clay is found in a carefully protected place where people cannot just go and dig it up whenever they feel like it. Before a journey is taken to that special place, prayers are said and offerings are made. The people then ask the Earth for permission to dig the clay. Among the Apache potters, it is assumed that the clay as well as the Earth herself are sacred and must be treated with respect.* This relates in a beautiful way to our scripture from Jeremiah, hopefully reminding us that the clay we are made of is also sacred. We are sacred aspects of this Earth on which we live and move and have our being. When we die and our bodies are returned to the Earth we remember that we were formed from her dust and it is to dust that we return. Rather than hearing this as something meant to remind us of our insignificance, I hear this as a reminder of our deep and abiding oneness with all that is – with the Earth, yes, but with all of her other inhabitants, equally made of clay, and with God whose breath gives this human clay of ours life.

Today's scriptures are attempts by God and the prophets to remind us of who we are, to remind us of the sacred stuff of which we are made. They are meant to encourage us to live up to our birthright as members of this sacred Earth community and to encourage us to make choices that reflect positively on us and on our relationship with God. If we truly are God's children, then we must act like it. We must choose life and prosperity by loving God and obeying the laws that God has laid out for us, laws that keep us in alignment or in potter's terms, keep us centered. These are laws related to every aspect of life – laws that make society function well, laws that bring justice to all people, laws that revere the Earth and treat her inhabitants with respect. In this way we become beautiful vessels who are capable of holding the love of God steady and strong in this challenging world.

Creating God, we are awed by the love and care you take with each and every one of us. Every single one of your children is precious and beloved. We pray for the strength and integrity to act in ways that honor you and that honor the Earth community of which we are a part. May we be beautiful, strong vessels who hold the good that is possible through your love. In Jesus we pray, Amen.