

**Sermon: September 11, 2016 – Jeremiah 18: 1-11**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

There is a unique, mesmerizing beauty to watch someone work at a potter's wheel.

The process is so ancient, for other than introducing an electric motor to turn the wheel, the basics at the potter's wheel have remained the same across cultures and across millennia: a stone wheel, clay, water, hands. A lump of clay is drawn, by the heel of the hand, the palm, the fingers, strength from forearms and shoulders and core, and suppleness encouraged by water, into a functional piece of pottery. Much like the description of creation in the book of Genesis, where the formless void gradually takes shape at the hands of the creator, a lump of clay becomes something more when shaped by the creative, experienced hands of the potter.

As we see walls reaching up from the clay, we can imagine it in finished form: a casserole dish, a vase, a bowl... and then, sometimes, this happens (pottery collapses).

There are times when life resembles this all too closely. Plans are set, progress is made, then something goes awry and everything either flies apart or collapses inward.

One day the prophet Jeremiah, living some 600 years before Jesus, went to a potter's house and wrote:

I went down to the potter's house and found him working at his wheel. Now and then there would be something wrong with the pot he was molding from the clay with his hands. So he would rework the clay into another kind of pot as he saw fit. (Jeremiah 18:3-4, NEB)



In case anyone might misinterpret the significance of this, the prophet continues:

Then the Lord said to me, "I, the Lord, say: 'O nation of Israel, can I not deal with you as this potter deals with the clay? In my hands, you, O nation of Israel, are just like the clay in this potter's hand.' There are times... when I promise to build up and establish a nation or kingdom. But if that nation does what displeases me and does not obey me, then I will cancel the good I promised to do to it." (Jeremiah 18: 5-10)

Part of human life is developing the resilience to deal with the small calamities. A town festival seemingly ruined by rain, the job interview that doesn't succeed, the soufflé that falls. When we put work into something, we begin to envision it in its finished form, then it flops, we need to have ways to take a deep breath, put the failure behind us, and keep moving forward.

But what about the bigger stuff? What do we do when our highest hopes implode? Everyone, at some point in life, will experience something big that comes tumbling down – in their life, in the life of a loved one, in the life of their community or nation, in the collective memory of the world. It could be health, it could be a relationship or career, it could be something as huge as the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – 9/11. When we find that life has lost its axis, and the beautiful art object that had been emerging on the potter's wheel gets broken back down into clay, it is so deeply discouraging. And when we are feeling that lost and betrayed, it is common to be drawn toward blame: blaming self, blaming someone else, or blaming God.

The image of God as the divine potter can be a huge help in answering this question, but I need some assistance to really bring that image forward, because turning pottery on a wheel is one of many hobbies I have absolutely no direct experience of. There is a Pastor and Seminary Professor in Colorado, however, by the name of Eric Smith, who knows quite a bit about the Hebrew prophets and pottery, so I'd like to share some of his words with you now. He writes,

"I happen to be married to a potter, so this text resonates especially well with me. What Jeremiah says is true: potters routinely abandon old, failing projects and turn them into new things. In our basement, we have a huge plastic trash can of what we call 'reclaim,' which is scraps of clay, and sometimes whole pieces, that have failed somewhere in the process of production, and wait to be mixed back together into usable clay. Jeremiah is applying this image to God's people; God can

choose what to do with the clay. Indeed, in Jeremiah, God-the-potter isn't always an ally; verse 11 is a shot across the bow to Judah that God is as willing to destroy as to create."

"There is a thrifty economy at work in pottery, and that's what seems to be happening in Jeremiah with regard to God and the world. At issue in Jeremiah is not abandonment, but reworking. Origen of Alexandria [writing around 200 AD] called this *apo-kata-stasis*, the notion that all creation will be redeemed and reconciled to God in the end. That seems to me to be very much in line with what Jeremiah's image of the potter is saying. Reworking isn't always a punishment; sometimes it's more than we could have hoped for."

Those can be hard words to hear, depending on the nature of the loss someone has endured. I have also seen, in my own life's trajectory and in the life stories of others, the absolute truth of God's power to rework our lives with us.

Take the story of Michelle Stilwell, once again winning gold at the Paralympics. As described on her personal website,

"At the age of 17 Michelle was rendered quadriplegic after falling from a friends back while piggyback riding. Prior to her injury Michelle...excelled at track, basketball and ringette. Her injury has not put a stop to her enjoyment of these sports, just a few alterations.

"[Michelle was] a gold medalist at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Wheelchair Basketball... however, [she] was forced to quit basketball shortly after the games due to complications arising from her spinal cord injury. Rather than give up, she...channeled her competitive drive and passion for sport into a new sport, [rising] from a novice Wheelchair racer to World champion in just two years."

Oh, and in her spare time she's a wife and mother, the MLA for Parksville/Qualicum and the Minister for Social Development and Social Innovation in the BC Legislature.

When I read her story, I hear much more than just "making the best of it." There is an embrace of the circumstances at hand, a view of a new horizon, a full engagement with the new circumstances of life. I don't know anything about her spiritual leanings and don't want to make any assumptions on that front, but when I hear her perspective on life I hear a lot of positive reworking going on. Again from her website we read,

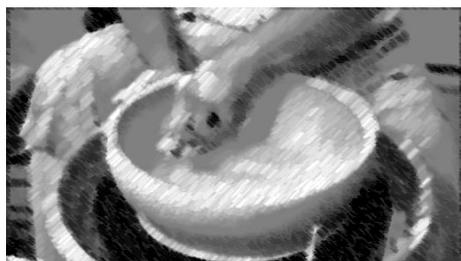
"Michelle actively speaks about the stages of her life, the circumstances that brought her to become a wheelchair athlete, her major victories, and her minor disappointments. Her words to live by are 'Remove self-imposed limitations - anything is possible with a positive attitude.'" Wow.

It is so important, as our lives unfold, to have that sense: that all is possible, that we are never unsupported. Even when we lose functionality, even when the shape of life is all messed up, all is not lost for we are not abandoned or alone. No matter how challenging things are, God's presence is within hailing distance, whether we experience that in the personal and personified terms that Jeremiah has used; or as the power of creative, redemptive love in the world; or as the supportive guidance of friends whose care embodies Christ's love for us; or as an unquenchable fire that has been placed in our hearts. The hands of God may or may not be actively shaping my life as a potter shapes clay, but I can say this from first-hand experience: those experienced, loving hands are close enough that even in the worst of times, I'm not going to slide off the wheel. Life will seldom unfold according to our plans, so we need to approach the next chapter of life with eyes and hearts wide open to the great opportunities that come next.

One more thing needs saying this morning, in our time at the potter's house. While clay is not specifically willful, it does at times seem to have a mind of its own – and similarly, it is very true that whatever we make of life, is not just God's plan for our life, an external thing that will be foisted upon us whether we go along with it or not. Life is an active partnership between God's creativity and our willingness to be shaped by that creativity. We live in a world that has all kinds of challenges, challenges that have become even more evident to us in the fifteen years since 9/11. The gaps between have and have-not, between indigenous and settler, between Muslim and Christian, between Palestinian and Israeli, between reasoned speech and extremism, between politically left and politically right, between those who open doors and those who bolt the doors closed, are huge. Just trying harder is not, on its own, going to solve

things. But committing ourselves to be those who embody love, and trusting in the skill of the life-loving artisan we call God, and allowing God to take who we are and what we know and how we love, and deploy us in new ways, can and will change the world, even if the process is painstakingly slow. We can call it re-working, we can call it emergence, we can call it resurrection, but whatever name we use, it is the source of our life and the source of our hope.

John Bright, an outstanding Biblical scholar of the 1960s, looked at the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Jeremiah and wrote this (in the masculine language of the day – p.125): “The point is not, as some think, that God will continue to work patiently with his people and, in spite of the fact that they may temporarily thwart him, will in the end make them the ‘vessel’ that he had intended them to be. The clay *can* frustrate the potter’s intention and cause him to change it: as the quality of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, so the quality of a people determines what God will do with them.” God is lovingly present with us, and we have the free will to determine how adaptive we will be to life’s circumstances and the supportive, renewing presence of God’s holy love. In times of deep challenge, there is also the presence of deep love.



Rather than closing this sermon with words, I’d like to close it with a visual: earlier, we saw the clay pot collapse; now, I’d like to show you how the potter adapted to that. With this clip, I invite your silent prayers for God’s intention for lives refreshed, and a world made new.... Amen.

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