

**Sermon: September 8, 2019 – Jeremiah 18: 1-11**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

A potter, working at a wheel. What a timeless, cross-cultural image that is. The oldest known pottery, found in China, is 20,000 years old, and by 6,000 years ago or perhaps even 8,000, there is evidence of potters' wheels in Mesopotamia.

The recollection by Jeremiah, then, of visiting a potters' house and seeing a visual metaphor for a hands-on God at work in the world, is one that resonates across the ages. It certainly does in my life.

This past week, I had one of those life anniversaries that make you pause and ponder. It was twenty years ago this past week, somewhere around the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, that I crashed with clinical depression.

In 1999 I was serving a young, growing congregation and from most external indicators, things were great. Problem was, my brain chemistry was getting more and more messed up as I slept less and worried more. The amount of responsibility I was taking for things that were not even close to being my problem, was unreal; the amount of guilt and shame I experienced and fed, for the dissonance between my public persona and my extremely critical inner voice, was devastating; an absolute inability to say no to anything, backed up by some really impressive cognitive distortions, was exhausting; and the relationship I had come to have with God, wondering why God would have put me and the congregation in this relationship only to have it fail four years later, was broken. And when those who loved me called a halt to it all, and sent me to seek medical attention that would have me off work for a full year, it felt very much like God the potter had pushed in the walls of this vessel and shmunched me back into a lump of clay.

That is one side of the image, of the potter Jeremiah encountered. When the potter was in the midst of working with clay and the process wasn't going as desired, the potter would break it down and make it into something else. It's hard to tell whether the Hebrew here is talking about things simply not working out, or if the clay has a mind of its own and is being difficult or obstinate, but one way or another the potter takes action. The Prophet Jeremiah, seeing the plight of his people, wanted them to understand through this prophecy, their need to yield once more to the God who made them in the first place.

Then later in the passage, it is just as clear that when a people repent, God is willing and able to work with that. The broken down clay, if still supple, doesn't get condemned and tossed away, it gets reworked into something else functional and/or beautiful. God, creator of all, is the potential re-worker of any person or people who seek a new start.

When I crashed twenty years ago I could only see the first part of this metaphor: I felt ashamed at my part in the crash, and judged by God. But as I was taken off the fast-spinning potter's wheel, I experienced the loving intention of God, the rest of the metaphor, as I entered a circle of medical expertise and care that literally saved my life, and opened me to a new future. It took a full year for my wounded emotional life and my wounded mind to heal, and some parts of my cognitive processing weren't fully back for about eight years.

It was, at one and the same time, one of the hardest experiences of my life and one of the most life-enhancing. It was only when others intervened and my insanity was named for what it was, that I could recognize God's skilled, supple hands holding me, re-hydrating me, getting me ready for a new stage in my journey. Away from full-time ministry for more than a dozen years, I used other parts of my personality and developed new abilities, saw the 9-to-5 working world from the inside, made some terrific friends, came to have a lived empathy for those whose

mental health has been harmed and – eventually – was made ready to re-enter ministry, with you.

This full metaphor of potter and clay challenges inaccurate understandings of ourselves and our creator. For many people, life's hardest circumstances get interpreted as the actions of a wrathful and punitive God; they do not sense the loving hands that hold them in the time of rebuilding. I can hardly imagine, for example, what it must have felt like these past few days for the people of the Bahamas, to have the indescribably powerful, cruel Hurricane named Dorian come sweeping in on you, and then just stay there, creeping along at one mile per hour while battering you with wind and rain and ocean waves. Though I don't think the "act of God" language still gets used much in Insurance policies, that understanding permeates our world: natural disasters are understood to have some sort of divine intent to them, especially when they stay put and pummel you.

But the God who has been made known to us not only in the power of creation but in the sufferings of Christ Jesus, is not a detached warlord who unleashes fury on us. God is present to us in our times of loss, challenge, suffering; God reaches out to clean things up, restore and rebuild, help us move on. I would not presume to tell people in the midst of disaster how they should think or feel, but I can share from first-hand experience that the God I thought had punished me by making me crash, was instead the one who took that opening in my life to nurse me back to health, leading me to wholeness and new life.

As we get ready to make an important decision about this congregation's identity next week, voting on becoming an Affirming Ministry, I want to put one more example in front of you, of a place where the image of God the potter can be helpful if one experiences the restorative fullness of the metaphor, or harmful if only the intentional breaking-down part is heard.

Countless LGBTQ folks have had the experience, of being told that their lives are an abomination against God. Scripture is weaponized and people are told that to be gay is to be sinful, to be lesbian is to have gone astray, to be trans is to tell God that he (male pronoun intended) has made a mistake. There continues to be so much religious-inspired hatred against the queer community, that many LGBTQ folks long ago stopped even imagining that there could be a place of welcome for them within religious community. All these years they've been told they are stubborn, wicked pots that need to be re-formed by the potter God.

But the truth is that the full breadth of the sexual spectrum is a gift from God, we are all formed by God's loving hands out of raw material that was good to start with and never stops being good. I love the idea that the same potter and the same wheel makes bowls and pitchers and cups and vases. There are many sizes and shapes and purposes served by the items that come off that wheel. And while Jeremiah's focus was on the times when clay needs to be broken down and re-worked, we aren't told of the dozens of beautiful, sturdy clay vessels lining the potter's shelves.

It is so important, for communities of faith to truly live this new, fuller, loving narrative. To be an Affirming Ministry will be to explicitly learn and grow and change, as we become more fully aware that all of us are children of the one Creator, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or anything else that is part of one's personhood. We live in the home of a divine potter whose merciful, skilled hands are proud of everyone's personhood, just as we are.

Yes, there are times in life when we need a fresh start. It would not be true to Jeremiah's metaphor, or to the realities of our world, to suggest that there aren't times when our actions have put us into a situation where we pretty much need to start over in a whole new way. And God is quite capable of working with us when those kinds of hard interventions have to happen. But if I could clarify or even challenge one thing in Jeremiah's image, it would be to be clear that

many of life's hardest moments – accidents, disasters, illnesses – just happen. Sometimes clay just kind of flops and needs a helping hand – not because it is being disobedient, but because that just happens sometimes with clay. And when things do flop in our lives, or threaten to sling us off the edge of the fast-spinning wheel, the key thing to know is that the potter is there to catch us, and shape us, and guide us into wholeness.

If there are places in your life where you can identify with this metaphor, I encourage you to embrace that and find its healthiest application for you. If you have experienced brokenness, I encourage you to trust in God's support as you find health, and I hope that this congregation can be a resource to that as well. If you see big changes that need to happen in your life, I encourage you to take the steps needed, with the necessary supports, knowing that God wants you to live a new life in abundance. If you sense that the hardships of your life are a form of holy punishment, I encourage you to find a new narrative, that understands God as a divine companion, rather than a punitive scorekeeper. And if you have been judged by others, or if you live with an inner critic telling you that they and God and everyone thinks you're not good enough, don't you believe it – that isn't how the passionate, skilled, loving shaper of our lives sees you. God, who loves all people and all of creation completely and without reserve, wants you to embrace your life as a thing of beauty. Because, it is.

Thanks be to God, for the gift of life, and the creator of life who is with us through all of it. Amen.

For further reading:

Hurricane Dorian, Bahamas:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/weather/why-hurricane-dorian-moving-so-slowly-n1049156>

Jeremiah commentaries:

Bright, John. *Anchor Bible: Jeremiah*. NYC: Doubleday, 1965. Pp.

Clements, Ronald. *Interpretation Commentary: Jeremiah*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1992. Pp.

LGBTQ experiences of religion: <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministries-program/>

Mental Illness & Brain Disease: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sacramento-street-psychiatry/201512/are-psychiatric-disorders-brain-diseases>

Pottery history:

<https://deneenpottery.com/pottery/> and <https://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2012/0628/World-s-oldest-known-pottery-discovered-in-China>