

2 August 2020
Isaiah 45:9-10, Jeremiah 18:1-11, 2
Corinthians 4:7-12
God is a Potter
First Mennonite Church

I'm not a Potter. My only real connection to clay was when I was young and made a mistake of walking through my grandparent's garden after a rain. Their garden soil was a heavy gumbo, and as I slogged through it, more and more of it collected on my boots, quickly turning my size 4 into a size 40! I was lucky to get out alive.

My only other connection to clay isn't really a connection at all as it involves Playdough and my children. Playdough isn't clay, but



is a mixture of water, salt, and flour. Apparently, Playdough wasn't intended to be a toy either, but rather a product to clean coal soot off of wallpaper.¹

watched many pottery-making videos.

I've also never preached a sermon on God the Potter before, so I had some work to do. I wrestled with the text in Jeremiah, researched pottery-making, and

I discovered that in the ancient world pottery jars were places people hid their valuables. Much like people today who hide their valuables in their freezer. The apostle Paul writes about the beauty and value of our physical bodies when he compares them to pottery jars: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7), he says.

At first glance, this passage in Jeremiah seems to confirm my childhood image of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing deity who is vengeful and retributive, emotionally indifferent, and in whose hands, people are nothing but putty waiting to be shaped or squashed.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/play-doh-was-originally-meant-for-something-very-different_n_5ac51703e4b09ef3b24300db

Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel
(Jeremiah 18:6b).

But if this is our metaphor of the divine/human relationship, then how do we deal with human freedom in relation to the Potter? Clay is inert. Passive. It just sits there and does nothing until the Potter comes along and makes something out of it. If this is our metaphor, then we are not free. We cannot make mistakes, nor can we go against the will of God. Everything is predetermined.

In this sermon series, I've been talking about different metaphors for God. Metaphors are our limited human way of talking about God, making sense of who God is and what God is like. All metaphors draw on a particular part of human experience and use it to describe a particular aspect of God. Metaphors help to say something about God, but in **no way** do they say everything. No metaphor fully describes God, but only manages to describe one tiny sliver of who God is and what God is like.



Let's take an example of the metaphor, God is a rock. Some of us may like this metaphor. But, what do we mean by it? I think we mean that God is steadfast, always there, strong and mighty, right? Never would we imagine that God is made of granite or limestone. But, if we describe God as a

rock, are we saying that God has no feelings or emotions? I don't think so. But my point is that a rock is a good metaphor to use occasionally for God, but not exclusively. We need to use a wide variety of metaphors, not just one or two. God is a Rock, in some ways, and not in others.

The same goes for the metaphor of God the Potter and we the clay. How is God like and not like a Potter? How are we like and not like clay?

Let's return to Jeremiah 18 in order to explore these questions.

Jeremiah's ministry took place over a long time, lasting over four of the most turbulent and decisive decades in the history of Israel. Our scripture passage today is about Jeremiah trying to find a way to speak the truth to Israel. It begins with a call to the prophet: *"Come, let us go down to the potter's house."* So, Jeremiah walked down to the potter's house, which is Jeremiah's day, would have been a large space, perhaps under the cover of a tent where a potter would have been working with a wheel, a jug of water, a few scattered tools, and maybe some shelves nearby to set wet pots on. Nearby would have been a pit where raw clay was mixed with the right amount of water and to work out as many impurities as possible. I imagine there were piles of pots, some fired and finished waiting to be sold, other freshly made pots drying in the sun, and still other broken ones that had been dropped or discarded for one reason or another. Somewhere in the middle of all this was the kiln where a large number of pots would be fired at once.



Jeremiah watched the potter grab a lump of clay, drop it on the centre of the wheel, and work it up and down with both hands. Then suddenly in one quick, fluid motion he pushed the clay into a perfectly rounded mound in the centre of the wheel, opened a small hole in the middle with his thumbs, and began pushing the walls of the pot outward and upward. With three or

four more pulls, and both hands working in tandem on the inside and outside of the growing cylinder, he stretched the clay taller and taller.

I found it fascinating to watch pottery-making videos this week. There was a sense of magic with the process. It happened with such quickness and ease of movement – the clay, potter, and wheel all working as one machine in the creation of the pot. I was awestruck!

Then, the potter started shaping the cylinder into a discernible form. He stretched the pot into shape. I imagine it was a large water jar. After smoothing the outside surface of the bulbous jar, the potter swiftly cut a cord underneath the pot to separate it from the

wheel head. He lifted it from the wheel, and set it on one of the shelves to dry a bit before adding a handle.

It's from watching how the potter completely controlled the clay, shaping and reshaping the clay to make a pot, Jeremiah makes the connection in verse 6:

God can do to Israel whatever God chooses, just as the potter can the clay (cf. Isa. 45:9-11).

Israel is not autonomous or independent, but is completely in the control of God. Jeremiah asserts God's complete sovereignty and Israel's complete subservience. That is the nature of the relationship.

So, on one level it appears that the metaphor of potter and clay is clear and straightforward: God is sovereign. God is transcendent. God is in complete control. God can even be heavy-handed with the clay, displaying little compassion. As the clay, we are inert, shapeless, and can do nothing. Everything we do is pre-determined and fixed.

Except, what follows makes the metaphor of God the Potter and we the clay much more subtle and nuanced. Let's take a look at vs 7-10. These verses are organized using an **if/if/then sequence** to depict the relationship between God and Israel. Here is a breakdown for vs 7-8:

- **If** I, that is, God, declare... that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it
- **If** that nation... turns from its evil
- **Then** I will change my mind...

And, what about vs 9-10:

- **If...** I declare... that I will build and plant it
- **If** it does evil in my sight
- **Then** I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it

Do you see the significance? **If** God says this ... but *if* Israel does that ... *then* God will change God's mind. The word, '**then**', expresses God's readiness, openness to act in new ways in response to Israel's new behaviour.

In both sequences the first 'if' is God's initial decision either to pluck up or plant. The second 'if' celebrates Israel's freedom. Israel, unlike that narrow understanding of the metaphor, is not fated, predetermined, but can act in new ways.

The metaphor of God the Potter and us as the clay has too often been understood much too narrowly. God's relationship with us and creation is not just a simple rigid transaction where God's makes the rules and we better keep the rules. No, the relationship is very complex.

One way of unpacking the complexity of the relationship between God and creation is to understand the potter's relationship with the clay. I discovered this week that clay is NOT just inanimate, lifeless mud sitting there waiting to be manipulated. No. Clay particles have evolved over a long geological period of time, which results in diverse kinds of clay. Some clay is stretchy and plasticky, some gritty and durable, some a pale gray hue, some a rich red. Some clay is good for teapots, while other clay, like kaolin clay, is good for porcelain.

Potters **must** be aware of these differences, be able to feel the clay in their hands so they are able to work appropriately with the material. **This requires knowledge of, and respect for, the clay.**

I wonder whether that isn't a lot like our relationship with God, too. God doesn't simply impose God's will on us helpless, defenseless creatures by pulling us this way or that, squeezing, rolling, pinching us without regard to who each of us are. Rather God works differently with each of us, because we are all different personalities.

Furthermore, different types of clay fire at different temperatures. Earthenware clays contain iron and other mineral impurities, so must be fired at a lower temperature, whereas porcelain clays are fired at a much high temperature. Firing clay not only makes the piece hard—and thereby functional—but firing also adds colour and beauty.

I wonder whether this isn't also like our relationship with God, too. God has already set a goal for creation and history. God is determined to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. As a result, God is determined to work over a long period of time with us, on us, shape us, form us, to be the kind of people God intends us to be.

Are there valuable lessons to be learnt from the metaphor of God the Potter and us the clay? Yes, there are many, but I will offer up three examples.

1. The first valuable lesson isn't so much about the metaphor as it is about the story in Jeremiah. I found it interesting where God told Jeremiah to go in order find inspiration. God didn't tell Jeremiah to go to church or to the temple or out to a quiet

and remote lake in the middle of the forest, but to a craftsperson's studio. Jeremiah received his inspiration not from looking at a finished masterpiece, but by observing the creative process of a potter.

This made me realize that you and I can also gain spiritual and theological insight right in our own home. Perhaps, it's watching someone paint a picture, baking a cake or a loaf of bread, observing a construction crew building a house, or watching pottery making on YouTube. Be open to spiritual insight in the most ordinary place and activities.

2. If God is the potter and we are the clay, then we are all like the three wonderful pieces of pottery on our display. When you look at yourself in the mirror, don't be disappointed or disgusted by what you see. Rather, celebrate the fact that you are a wonderful and unique part of creation. You are wonderfully made, said Psalm 139. You were created a little lower than the angels, declares Psalm 8. You were created in the very image of God says Genesis 2. You are a treasure in a clay jar, says Paul. You are an incredible work of art, because God the Potter does very good work. God the Potter doesn't make junk.
3. Finally, though we are works of art, we are, at the same time, **works in progress**. God's works in progress to be sure, but still, in progress. Some of us have been fired by life's intense heat. Some of us are colourful; others are earthier. Yet, the patient turning of the Divine Potter has made us all, spinning us around, shaping us, handling us gently, firmly, and creatively. Sometimes we may be well-centred, so that God's hands are able to mold us quite to God's will. Sometimes, though, we might best be described as "all wet"! If we were to consider ourselves the handiwork of God the Author, we could imagine ourselves as God's poetry or prose.

Here I will briefly shift metaphors for a moment from potter to author.

Maybe some of us feel like first drafts, while others sense that they have gone through many revisions and have been transformed by the Author's arduous task of expressing exactly what the Author intends to say. When I prepare my sermons, I type them out because I want to be sure to say what I intend to say. But, I know there are times when what I delivered was more of a first draft as opposed to a fourth or fifth draft that actually said what I wanted to say.

Some of us are probably third or fourth drafts of God's poetry. Maybe some of us are ninth drafts. What is the use of more and more drafts? What is the reason for such a long time on the Divine Potter's wheel? When writers compose poems, the purpose of

multiple drafts is to achieve two things: **to say what they mean and to create something beautiful**. When potters throw a pot, the purpose of a second or third try is to make something both **useful and lovely**.

So what about us? Is not what God did with us on the first draft good enough? Was not the Divine Potter's first attempt sufficient? Why do we have so much improving to do? Why are we works in progress—usually able to improve in so many ways? Why should we make the effort to be more loving, to be more true to ourselves, to be more useful, if God made us as we are to begin with?

How to accept ourselves as God formed us and how to stay alert to being a “work in progress,” ready to be edited or coloured or fired is a challenging balance act. Both the Divine Author and Divine Potter metaphors can lead us to consider that God is an Artisan who enjoys being creative, who likes to edit, mold, and shape us. I like this way of thinking of how God keeps working on us.

Christian discipleship, then, is really a partnership. God is editing us, or we are letting God, the Author of Life Divine, edit us. Maybe when we are close to being a final draft, we are close to what God is trying to create through us.

God is a Potter is a wonderful metaphor for as it describes God as a creative artist.

God is a Potter is a wonderful metaphor for it describes God's ongoing engagement with the world. Like a potter who works differently with different types of clay, so too, does God work with us and on us as unique parts of creation.

God is a Potter is a wonderful metaphor because, like a Potter who lovingly creates each piece of pottery, so too, does this loving God shape and molds us to be beautiful and functional parts of creation. Thanks be to God!