

## Reworked

*Jeremiah 18:1-11 (September 4, 2022)*

*by Paul Matheson*

When Lindsay and I are on vacation, we often like to bring home a souvenir: a little something to remember the place or the people we visited. But the ones we like the most are not your typical souvenir – made of plastic. What we collect are pieces of pottery.

It could be a serving bowl, a dish, a plate. *Or*, best of all, a coffee mug: something we can hold in our hands on a cold winter day when the snow is falling gently out the window, and think back to that place we had been, the potter we met, the little shop tucked away on some back country lane.



We love pottery: the rustic beauty of it and the utility of it. It's something we can use, not *just* admire – although we certainly do. Every pot is different. There's no such thing as factory uniformity. Each has been made by hand. The potter has used a certain clay, perhaps locally sourced. That clay has a certain texture, and colour and degree of refinement.

They present themselves with marks and imperfections – some might call them defects. Yet they are unavoidable and so must be accepted as part of the finished product. Each object bears the stamp of its creator: A different style, a certain technique, a favourite glaze, the lines of the potter's hands, a thumbprint on the handle. Pottery has personality in spades.

So when I pick out a mug from the cupboard for any particular day, I might choose something rough or smooth, tall or short, colourful or plain. Part of it depends on the mood I'm in.



The prophet Jeremiah was prompted by God to visit a potter's house. Such houses were common in most villages of the time. Potters produced the vessels necessary for daily life – cooking, serving, eating, drinking, storage.

“Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.”



*There*, in that *ordinary* place. Not in temple or sacred shrine. There, amidst the common work-a-day activity of a local business. In the busy production, in the making and moulding, in the heat and wetness and mess – that is where God invites Jeremiah to watch and listen, so that God's way might be revealed!

It's Labour Day weekend. And I wonder how often we look for God in the ordinary things of life. In our dusting and cleaning, baking and building. In the working of shifts and working of fields. In our travel to and fro. In the home of a neighbour, and maybe even in *our* home.

“Go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” There I will give you my message. If you look beyond the surface, if you see *past the superficial*, my truth will be revealed.

I find those words so hopeful and encouraging: That God’s word is given to one of God’s great prophets, Jeremiah, in the plain and simple and ordinary events of life. His life, *our* lives. God is all around. “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God,” as the poet wrote.<sup>1</sup>



We can find God in the activity of our days, in the labour of our hands. Farms and factories, kitchens and dining rooms and hospital beds – all of these can become sacred spaces where, by God’s grace, we may encounter the Gospel Word that brings us life.



What was God’s word for *Jeremiah*? What came to him there in that potter’s shop? He learned that we are clay in the hands of God. “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

We *are* clay, you know. The creation narrative in the book of Genesis describes our making in this way: “The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” (Genesis 2:7)

There’s a striking bit of word play in that passage. The man (in Hebrew *adam*) was formed of dust from the ground (in Hebrew *adamah*). Adam was formed from *adamah*. We are dusty, earthy, loamy, clay-like creatures.



It’s more than just a metaphor! We are made of carbon molecules and all sorts of minerals found in the earth. We come from it, we are part of it. We are *earthly* beings given life by the Spirit of God.



There is a vital relationship between God and us, the potter and the clay, the heavenly and our humanity. Just as the potter shapes the clay, so God, our Creator, is at work forming and shaping our human lives.



There is an intimacy in this. And it can get pretty *messy*! There’s pressing and pulling; smoothing, rubbing, lifting, shaping. What does it feel like to be clay in God’s hands? Is it always pleasant, *or* can it be difficult too?

The potter may have certain intentions for the clay. But things can go wrong. Jeremiah saw this. There in the potter’s shop, the vessel was *spoiled*. Who knows what happened? Too dry, too wet, pockets of air. The clay was uncooperative. Despite the potter’s best intentions, the potter’s years of experience, the potter’s finely honed skill, there are days that clay may not be workable. And so it is broken down, removed from the wheel, and set aside.

This raises an important question. What is *God’s* part in the making of the world? And what is *ours*? Are we responsive to the nudges of the Spirit? Do we listen for the sound of God’s voice? Can we envision what God intends for us?

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/38640-earth-s-crammed-with-heaven-and-every-common-bush-afire-with>, Accessed Sept. 3, 2022.

These things are not easy. They come through the practice of prayer, as we develop a growing awareness of God. A sensitivity to God's movements. And a happy willingness to allow God to influence our lives for good. "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."<sup>2</sup>



Let's pause for a moment and be still.

Have you ever felt the potter's touch? Have you ever wondered if there might be some overarching plan or purpose for your life? Have you ever imagined that God could be moving you toward this or that?

Has the hand of God felt heavy or light? Have these movements been painful or full of joy? It is often in moments of tragedy and darkness that God is most powerfully at work – though it may only be in retrospect that we see it.

Has there been a time in your life when you've denied the movement of God: ignored it, or carried on as though it wasn't really there? Maybe you pushed back against it. Asserted your *own* will, your own ideas, in preference to God's. Not that these two are always in competition. But they can be.

What a joy it is when God's will and our will are in *harmony*! When we are acting together in a way that embodies God's reign in the world more fully.

There are times we have this relationship *reversed*. Our clay has a mind of its own and we want to be in control. We think we're the potter. Isaiah said, "You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" (Isaiah 29:16)

Somehow we struggle to perceive a wisdom greater than our own. And a world whose horizons are greater than we can imagine. We lose trust in God



There is no person who has never experienced some moment of regret, some deep sorrow over choices that we have made and consequences that we have suffered. There is no life lived without *mistakes*.

But there is good news! These are never fatal flaws. Our lives, no matter how distorted, resistant or misshapen, can still be reworked by God. Jeremiah saw that in the potter's house.

"The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."

God *reworks* our spoiled lives. This clay that is who we are, the spoiled life that may have been set aside for a time, is picked up again and set back upon the wheel.

---

<sup>2</sup> George C. Stebbins, *Northfield Hymnal with Alexander's Supplement*, 1907.

God does *not give up* on us! Our clay is still precious and full of potential. So God takes our mistakes and small rebellions, our ignoring and our pushing back, and starts over one more time – patiently drawing us up in hands of love and shaping us into something new. Impossible, we think. But God does very well with the impossible.



“O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee. I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.”<sup>3</sup> The good news is that God’s love will *never* let us go.



Pottery is a complicated business. There are many steps to see a project through to completion. And I have it from a reliable source that things can go wrong at any stage along the way.



The clay must be mixed and properly hydrated, but that may not happen. It needs to be run through a pug mill or worked by hand to remove any air, but bubbles can remain. It must be placed on the wheel and centred. If not, then it will wobble out of balance.

It must be worked and then removed from the wheel, but that’s a tricky thing. It should be decorated and that can go wrong. Then fired in an incredibly hot oven, where it may crack. Then it must be glazed. But those glazes can do all sorts of unexpected things, not all of them appealing. Then it must be fired again.

At any of these stages there are more than ample opportunities for mistakes. The creative process is never over until it’s *actually* over. You know what farmers say: “You can never count the crop until it’s in the bin.”



How many times must our clay be reworked? I think *many* times! Our lives are long-term projects.

And because none of us are yet in the grave, I assume that means that we are not yet finished. We are people still in the making, whether just starting out or coming toward the end. And usually we have no idea where we are on that continuum. Our life can end at any time, or it can go much longer than we expect. The point is not how long the process takes, but what it looks like when it is *finished*.



What will my life look like? I’ve been thinking about that as I move through my mid-60’s. How might God’s character grow more within me? Where do I belong? What is there still to be accomplished? How might I use my remaining days for good? How would I like to be remembered?

God is not done with us, *any* of us. The cracks that have appeared, the flaws that we’ve accumulated – these can be worked into some strange and unfamiliar beauty. God may yet put some finishing touches on our

---

<sup>3</sup> George Matheson. 1882, *Life and Work*, 1883.

lives. Imagine the potter lifting us up, turning us round, examining every detail and smiling. Pleased to put us on display. Proud to see that God's intentions have been realized.

As the days go on, may our clay become more malleable – not by the forces of the world, or by our own desires, but *God's* desire. May our clay become more cooperative, less resistant. May it be true both for my life and for your life. And for our collective lives together in this church. For our community of faith here at First Mennonite. And for the world-wide church of Jesus Christ, called to serve our world and bear faithful witness to God's kingdom.