

**THE POETRY OF FIERCE LOVE**  
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 8, 2013  
Jill R. Russell

Texts:       Jeremiah 18.1-11;  
              Psalm 139.1-6; 13-18;  
              Philemon 1-21;  
              Luke 14.25-33

When life is full and the world seems precarious; when the rhetoric of politicians marching off to war betrays the complexity of the conflicts at hand; when you feel bone tired and weary of the hatred and the violence and the anger...wouldn't it be nice to come to worship and open the scriptures and hear a gentle Word from God that affirms and comforts and lifts us up? Something about love would be nice.

Instead we hear this harsh word of judgment and warning from Jeremiah and an equally disturbing word from the gospel that begins with a call to hatred and ends with the demand to give up *all* your possessions. If warmth and simplicity is what we were looking for today, we might be tempted to just head on home. But let's not because I am convinced that there IS something beautiful and life-giving in these texts that I want to reclaim with you today.

One of the keys to reclaiming the beauty and power of these texts is getting clear about how the image from Jeremiah and the rhetoric from the gospel are designed to impact us and then letting that impact be influenced by Psalm 139.

Let's begin in the image from Jeremiah of the potter and the clay. My brother-in-law creates pottery and makes beautiful pieces with interesting shapes and purposes and finishes. A lot of pottery today is made as art. Pottery in the ancient near east was for function. Each piece that was crafted had to be useful or it was destined for the garbage heap. The purpose of the clay lay in the potter's hands hopefully to become something useful and maybe even something beautiful.

Israel had lost track of that truth. They had delusions of grandeur that they were the ones determining their own fate; setting their own course with little concern for the purpose for which they were made. They are not alone in those delusions. We can fall into them so easily ourselves. After all we do have freedom to make choices: whether to get married or go to school or what field we will work in, how we will conduct business, where we will live. There is great freedom for us in life. Our choices matter and there are consequences for those choices.

The truth still remains: that our lives are shaped and held in the hands of God. We are not ultimately in control. Just ask someone whose life has changed in an instant and they will tell you with conviction that life is not in our control. How God holds our life is something of a mystery and is probably a sermon for another day. But please don't hear me as saying that God pulls strings and micromanages the details of all of our lives. I don't think this metaphor leads us in that direction.

Here's what I see at the center of this image: The Potter makes claims on the vessels of her creation. God creates each of us with a purpose in mind. Jesus describes this purpose in the gospel today as the life of discipleship. It is the reason we were created. It is the only way of life that the Potter had in mind. But it is not an easy way of life. Jesus wants to grab our attention here in the gospel of Luke. Where the prophet uses an image the gospel uses rhetoric. Take either one of these as literal instruction and you will go down the wrong road. Jesus uses hyperbole to underscore the very same claim that Jeremiah is making: that we are to commit ourselves first and foremost to God. As one translation puts it: you must love me more than father and mother, more than life itself. This commitment comes before family and friends, career, money, or possessions.

The Potter makes claims on the vessels of his creation and the expectations as we hear them in the gospel are unbelievably high. If we were left only with the impact of this image from Jeremiah and this rhetoric from Luke we might leave here with the weight of the world on our shoulders. Which is why I say that we need to read Jeremiah and even Luke in connection with Psalm 139. When we let the image of the prophet and the rhetoric of the gospel be experienced through poetry of the psalm we see that the

demand and the expectation flows from the fierce love that God has for us. The reason we should trust the Potter is not out of fear that if we make the wrong move we might find ourselves destroyed. If you read Jeremiah alone you might walk away with that impression. No - the reason we place such a high commitment on following after God and trusting the Potter's hand is because God knows us intimately, better than we know ourselves. God sees inside of us and discerns our thoughts. God is the One who has carefully knit us together. There is no place in our lives where God is not with us. When we wander away from God - God pursues us. When we suffer difficult times God lifts us up and gives us strength to go on. Even when we come to the end and feel alone and abandoned we find that God is still there. God is perhaps is the only one who is there. How can we do anything other than trust this God with the entirety of our lives? How can we do anything but commit ourselves to faithfully follow Christ?

I want to share one more image with you today. This time the image is taken not from an ancient text but from contemporary life; actually from this sanctuary several weeks ago. It came to me in the form of an email reflection from one of you and I have permission to share it with you today. Another snapshot of the fierce love God has for us.

The subject line of the email was "The Face of Grace:"

"Recently at Hope Church we have had a number of baptisms. I love being a part of that sacred ceremony. I am so impressed by the tenderness with which these precious children are treated - both by the pastors and by those who witness from the pews. Bringing forward the children who are present at the service is just such a wonderful, inclusive thing. They become a part of the promise!!! Fabulous idea to make the sacrament meaningful to them at such a young age.

While most of the baptisms are administered to infants, we have been fortunate lately to have a number of young children presented at the Font. I have been fortunate enough to have been sitting in a pew where I have had a complete view of the font. I admit to having tears roll down my cheeks as I observe these children. In their beautiful faces I see innocence, vulnerability, wide-eyed wonder and expectancy! And

as I look upon them, I am struck with love for them, so sacred is the sight. And this thought comes to me....."Could this be the way God looks upon us.....is this indeed the face of Grace?" And I have to think of the wonder of that...that despite the ways in which I have not lived out God's plan for me, despite the ways I have ignored and disappointed the Almighty One, He can still see me as that expectant, trusting, vulnerable child filled with wonder as I look up to receive His gift! Thanks be to God for that<sup>1</sup>"

Thanks be to God indeed!

Thanks be to God that we are loved so fiercely by the Potter who shapes us: that God will not let us go and God will not let us be.

This Table, this Font, they remind us of the Face of Grace that meets us here and then sends us out there.

When we can glimpse that face and experience the fierceness of God's love then we can hear the expectations of the prophet and the demands of the gospel not as warning and judgment from a wrathful god but as motivation and encouragement from the One who equips us to meet all of the challenge and complexity of our life.

So thanks be to God for this Word for us this day.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the email prefers to be anonymous.