

Pottery
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2016
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Text: Jeremiah 18

**** references to Walter Brueggemann's commentary on Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25 (Eerdmans, 1988) – in particular the introduction, p.17, and commentary on pp.160ff)*

I left out those clay and pottery pieces that I shared with the children in order for them to be a visual presence, an image, during the sermon. And what I mean to do by that is to be a bit Jeremiah-like– I don't want to be hokey about it, but something particular about Jeremiah is that as he uses rich imagery throughout many of his prophecies, he didn't just speak the images, he presented them physically too: when Jeremiah talks about a yoke of oppression he wears an actual oxen's yoke! when he uses a field as an image for his prophecy, he purchases a field! and when today we hear of this image of the potter and the clay, Jeremiah is compelled by the Spirit of the Lord to go to an actual potter's house – a place where lumps of clay and fine pottery and broken shards were all to be found. So these pieces are a Jeremiah vibe for you to take in – and if you simply want to reflect on those images and not so much my words, that's good with me too.

But Jeremiah did put images and words together – and here uses the potter and the clay to speak a word about God and God's people and even more broadly to all people. And there's something in particular first about the words that Jeremiah speaks here that I want us to notice – as this image of the clay is played out, this word of the Lord says: "I will pluck up and break down"...and then..."I will build and I will plant". Well, those are precisely the words that we heard just a couple of weeks ago at the beginning of Jeremiah as he is called as a prophet – the Lord says in Jeremiah 1: 'I will give you a word to pluck up and pull down, to build and to plant.' So when we hear that very same language echoed here, at the potter's house, it's meant to get our attention: this word connects directly to Jeremiah's call as a prophet and is at the heart of his message.

So first let's just hear what this image-word is that the Lord speaks through Jeremiah – and then let's see what we can make of it; since taking an image of a potter and clay and seeing what we can make of it seems fitting, right? Here's what this word of the Lord through Jeremiah says:

'God in history is the potter – God is the one shaping nations, shaping history on a broad and grand scale. God is at work spoiling the intentions of those working against God's purpose: 'I will pluck up and break down and destroy'; and at the same time God is nurturing the way of those who reflect God's purpose: 'I will build and plant.'

That's the word: God speaks of those who seem to be against God's will turning toward God's purposes, and God turning to them; of those who seem to be following God turning instead toward a fruitless path, and God's nurture turning away from them. The image is of human history being malleable in God's hands - lumps and beautiful pots and broken shards shaped toward God's purpose - God the Potter molds and shapes, forms and reshapes and reforms. That is the word Jeremiah expresses vividly, and I have tried to present it clearly.

But I think it's important to take a moment, and let that sink in, and then ask yourself: do you really buy that? do you really believe that? does that make any sense to you? and if so, could you explain it to me? – how that works and what that looks like in the world? Because here's what I know about history: I know of history made by the decisions of politicians and of people, by the making of war and the forging of peace, by the momentum of progress and knowledge, and the roadblocks of violence and ignorance – history as an accumulation of events and circumstances that we both participate in and are impacted by. That is what I know of history – but history molded by God the potter? – that's not my first thought – it offends my modern sensibilities and brings up lots of questions. What does it mean to portray God as with one nation or leader, and against another? – where does that lead? and perhaps a bigger, deeper question, is if God is the one shaping things, then just how good a job is God the Potter doing in this world?

Although perhaps one way into those questions is to realize my sensibilities aren't really so modern after all— to realize the word given from Jeremiah was difficult to hear back then too — that it offended the sensibilities of Israel, and of anyone else who might have paid attention too. We often, in churches, as Christians, share a view of Scripture that it is a word for us to go to, and then interpret in light of our modern situation — interpretations changing as history keeps rolling on. And that interaction with scripture has some very good possibilities in it. But there is another possibility too — in speaking of the prophet Jeremiah, theologian Walter Brueggemann says that ‘rather than applying the text to our situation, our situation is to be submitted to the text for a fresh discernment — it is our situation that requires a new interpretation.’

And here's what I think that means: in every modern time — the modern time Jeremiah spoke to, and the modern time now, and every time in between - part of what we do, as people, as nations, as people of faith, as people of history — part of what we do is get set in, locked into, a view of our lives and our world. And as much as we focus on how much things change in the course of history - and there is a whole lot that changes - I would say that actually the views that humanity are locked into are quite similar over time...from Israel and the world back then, to us and our nation, and the peoples and nations of the world today — viewpoints like this:

- one might think of history as about God being on your side, or on the side of your nation, or cause, or your religion - and that gives credence, approval to all that one does
- one might think of God as not present or involved at all, events unfolding as they will, or only by our will — God on the sidelines
- or one might think of no God at all: that it is power and politics that are in control — the power of force or of money or of influence — those things as the true forces of history

All different views, but all similar in that they are locked into a certain view of how the world works — of how our lives and our history are shaped: they all in some way say that we are the potters, the shapers, of history- a viewpoint shared across time.

But the challenge of Jeremiah is to hear a different viewpoint altogether — a view from God that demands a different perspective on history and on our lives. Jeremiah says that God is

the Potter. And if we hear that – or if we submit our reality to that view – that is very different. It is not different in that it trades one kind of fatalism or determinism for another – but rather the image of God as the potter is remarkably dynamic and creative – it presents an interplay of God being responsive to the actions and choices of people: of people shaping life in a certain way and God responding to it; of God empowering people to shape life in meaningful ways.

But what is so different about it – what is radical about it as we submit our lives and history to the word in Jeremiah - is that it makes clear what it is that we shape and what it is that God shapes. What God calls people to do is to have their lives shaped as vessels of faithfulness to God; and that is different than seeing ourselves as the shapers of history – that is God’s role. This word from Jeremiah says that history is already shaped: it is the place in which God is bringing about God’s purposes for life – history is held in God’s hands. And so in the midst of that, what is in our hands is to fit our lives to God’s purpose – knowing, believing, trusting, feeling in our bones that our lives are molded into what God desires for us and for this world. Breuggemann writes that this word from Jeremiah calls us away from trusting economy and technology and military might and progress as the primary forces of history, but instead to see the practices of compassion, of justice, of peace as our call in history. And do you see the distinction there? – it is not to say that those other forces are not important or strong – they impact us and others profoundly, directly; the issue is whether or not we trust that those are the forces to which our lives belong and to which history belongs. Jeremiah calls us to see compassion, justice, peace as the true shape of history – Jeremiah calls for eyes of faith to see God the Potter at work in the world through those powers, and to trust that it is to God’s reign of life that our lives truly belong – to trust that justice, compassion and peace are the ways in which God is shaping history still – to live and shape our lives as part of that story.

This image speaks to us on a grand scale – important for us to hear in a world tells us a different story; but as important as it is, the image of God the Potter at work in history and nations can seem too grand to find our own foothold in it. So one thing that helps me with that is Psalm 139, and I want to close by putting the images and feelings of that Psalm alongside this word of Jeremiah. What Psalm 139 does it takes God the potter, the God of the nations and of history – takes that God, and says that our lives are deeply, personally, intimately, always connected to this God. God the Potter shaping nations and forming history to God’s purpose – God the potter who forms you in the womb, and who is with you wherever your life goes – bringing those images together invites us not only to see our history in a new way, but our lives as well. The mystery of the potter of the nations, is that the potter shapes each of us as well. The mystery of history and of time, is that God’s broad purposes are played out in the specific interplay of God’s Spirit in each life. And so the freedom and life of being children of this God is that we are not locked into a world that can shape us at its whim – we are children of a God whose Spirit shapes history, and us, into the ways of life.

The God of the nations, the God of history; the God of our lives, the God who shapes faithfulness in us; the God whose will is to form life. God the Potter, present in our lives and our world this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.