

Being a Vessel for God's Blessing

Jeremiah 18:1-11
December 4, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
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Several years ago a nationwide poll asked, "What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?" Can you guess the first thing people want to hear? If you guessed it is "I love you," you're right. The second was, "You are forgiven." Number three, believe it or not, was, "Supper is ready."¹ How long has it been since we have heard these words spoken to us? "I love you" – God's unconditional love. "You are forgiven" – God's unmerited grace. "Supper is ready" – God's unsurpassed invitation.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.'" Do you hear God speak to you? How? In what way does God speak to you? And about what? What does God say; what is God concerned with regarding you?

In our Old Testament Lesson today, God speaks to Jeremiah regarding the Israelites, saying he's like a potter who's shaping a clay vessel or jar. "The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand," says Jeremiah, "and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."

Well, at the time of Jeremiah, the people of Israel were on a perilous path of idolatry and injustice, letting other things in life crowd out God, engaging in and tolerating wick and evil ways, and generally not following the teachings of the Lord, at least not as closely as they could.

So God sent Jeremiah to warn them, and to explain to them that they are not in it all alone, that God is with them. And not only is God with them, but God is actively shaping them to become the people God knows they can be, a people worthy of the blessing of the Lord. The greatest blessing that God ever bestowed upon the earth is the birth of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus to enter into the hearts of all people that we may never again allow rebellion and injustice to become the norm, to rule the day. And yet, every day we struggle to follow the Lord more closely and treat each other more lovingly. There is a lot of pressure in life that makes it hard to go that extra mile for someone, turn the

¹ With thanks to James A. Harnish, "Walking With Jesus: Forgiveness," Tampa, Fla., March 22, 1998.

other cheek when wronged, resist temptation in a moment of weakness, and stand up for Christ in the face of injustice and cruelty.

We get tired, we get angry, we give in, and we back down, feeling that the struggle is just too hard, trying to live up to our calling as Christians. The distance between how things are and how they should be is just so huge and insurmountable.

Can you imagine what it was like at the time of Jeremiah? An entire nation spoiled in the eyes of God, needing to be completely reshaped? “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand,” says God, “so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

Israel was the raw material that God worked and reworked, making it the best it could be, the most well-shaped vessel in which to place the hopes and dreams of all people of the earth, a people worthy of the blessing of God.

But that’s not what God had at the time of Jeremiah. It’s as if our spiritual ancestors forgot how special they were in God’s eyes, how important they were to the future of humankind and all creation. Or maybe they just gave up. Maybe they gave up on the promises of God, the Advent promises of hope, peace, joy and love for all people.

Regardless of what brought the Israelites to this point of defiance and despair, God is here to reassure them – and us – that we can make it, we can get through this and become the people God intends us to be.

God says, “... If (the nation, if the people) turn from (their) evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on (them). ... But if (they do) evil, not listening to my voice,” says God, “I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to them... ... Therefore,” he says, “... turn ... and amend your ways and your doings.”

God is giving the Israelites a chance to stay in his good graces, by allowing him to shape them into the people he sees them to be. But if they’re not willing to be shaped by God, if they’re set on shaping things their way, then God sees nothing but disaster for them.

It’s interesting that God says he will change his mind about the fate of the Israelites. Did you catch that? We don’t tend to think of God in terms of changing his mind, do we? And truth be told, in the fullness of Christ, God doesn’t change his mind. Even way back then, God knew his plans to send Jesus into the world, his plans to change everything with the coming of Christ.

So when God says he will change his mind concerning the disaster the Israelites are headed for, he's giving them the chance to change their ways. If God can change his mind, then we can too. God is giving us a chance to change our ways.

If we were to view ourselves as vessels being shaped by a master potter, in what ways do we see ourselves as not quite right in God's eyes? In other words, how is God working on you? What about you seems good in God's eyes, and what seem not quite right? Are you willing to let God continue to shape and change who you are? I hope so. Because none of us is a finished product; God is still working on each and every one of us, and God counts on us to become the solid, well-formed vessels that will carry his blessings out into the world.

As John Hanneman says in his piece titled "Shaped by an artist," "...We are being shaped and molded spiritually.... God, the master craftsman, is shaping our character. He has a vision of what he wants us to become, a purpose for our lives that is unique and significant for each of us." "He has designed us to be his holy people," says Hanneman. "We are vessels that house something very special – the Spirit of God. We may be ordinary clay pots, but God is molding and shaping us for his use – and he uses everything in our lives to accomplish his purposes. God is the potter, we are the clay."²

So, no matter how independent we think we are, no matter how on-top of things we feel, no matter how in-control we believe ourselves to be, the fact is, we are still essentially clay. We are being worked, molded, shaped and stretched by the hand of God.

And because of the promise that Jesus brings, we have the assurance that we are and will always be the bearers of the gifts of Jesus Christ, pouring out upon a dry and thirsty world all the hope, peace, joy and love that he brings.

Amen.

² John Hanneman, "Shaped by an artist," June 10, 2001, Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino Web Site, Pbcc.org.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we are waiting. We've been waiting for a long, long time; waiting for love that breaks down hostile walls, and light that brightens darkened minds; waiting for peace that always seems at hand, yet never quite arrives; waiting for intangible qualities like truth and justice to become concrete: the Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

Lord, thank you for Advent, for this time of preparation that makes the waiting all worthwhile.

We ask your blessings on our preparations for Christmas, the joy and love and togetherness we so dearly need and anticipate.

We pray this joy, love and togetherness especially for those who are facing struggles this Advent season.

We pray all this, loving God, in the name of your greatest gift to us, Jesus the Christ, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song singing the prayer that he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.