

A Work in Progress©

Luke 14:25-33; Jeremiah 18:1-11

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Yikes! Both of these passages from Luke and from Jeremiah made me tremble in my shoes at first. They sound so ... difficult; so intimidating, in a way. What does a preacher preach when it sounds like this?

Jesus says if you want to be a disciple of his, you have to hate your parents and give away all your possessions. Really? What kind of disciple wants to do that? And what kind of leader asks you to do that, anyway? I thought Jesus was the loving one – the one who brought grace to the world, not some strict law that is impossible to keep. Right?

And what is this with Jeremiah? Jeremiah must have been shaking in his shoes saying this Word of the Lord to the Israelites. He was the prophet that tried to convince God he was not prophet material. “You don’t want me,” he said, when God called him to serve. “I’m just a boy.” (Jeremiah 1 – paraphrased)

God told him, “Don’t say that. Don’t use the excuse of being a young person. I will put my words in your mouth and you will speak for me and you will go where I want you to go. When you look at the faces of the people, do not be afraid.”

That sentence right there would make me tremble. I would say, “See ... you’re already telling me they’re going to scowl and look mean and ready to stone me. Hah! Do not be afraid, indeed!”

But, Jeremiah was obedient to God. He trusted the Lord. So here he is. God tells him to go see the potter and there Jeremiah would receive the words to say to the people.

A potter was an ordinary, everyday kind of person. Pottery was quite a booming business back in the day ... Jeremiah’s day. Potters were needed and were kept busy making cookware, jars, bowls, plates, and cups ... everything a household needed for everyday use.

So finding a potter wasn’t a difficult thing. “Go down to the potter’s house ...” God said. And Jeremiah went and stood watching as the potter took the clay and slammed it on the board, kneading it over and over, adding water to make it pliable ... but not too much! It needs to be stiff enough to hold up ... but not so stiff it was impossible to mold into the creation it was intended to be.

Jeremiah watched as the potter threw the clay on the wheel and started it turning with that lever he pushed with his leg. Around and around the wheel went and the potters hands shaped and molded and pulled on the clay as it grew taller and wider and was becoming a beautiful, usable object.

But somewhere along the way, it started losing its shape and it became too thin on one wall and it started collapsing and leaning to one side.

The potter shook his head. Stopped the wheel, clumped up the clay, rolled it into a ball again and slammed it a few times into the table to get out the air bubbles so he could begin again.

As someone who is an amateur potter I know the feeling well. I've spent more time starting over with a lump of clay than I have actually making something that looks like anything usable. Sometimes it seems like the clay just has a mind of its own.

It's kind of like a dance, really, between the potter and the clay. The potter has a vision in mind of what this clay is going to become. But the clay often doesn't cooperate. It seems like it wants to do its own thing.

Often times, what was supposed to be a cup becomes a bowl instead; what was meant to be a bowl might end up looking more like a pitcher ... which is okay, if you are just creating for fun and it doesn't really matter what it becomes as long as the potter is enjoying the process.

That would be more of a hobby than an actual way of making a living. If your business depends on selling so many bowls and so many cups, this lump of clay better become what you intend it to become ... or you smash it and start over.

Which is rather daunting when you imagine that God is pointing out that God's people are the clay and God is the potter, especially if the Potter God isn't happy with what the People Clay is becoming.

And we all know that People Clay are not much different from mud clay when it comes to wanting our way and having a strong will to do things our own way instead of the Creator's way.

But here we are, listening to Jeremiah speak the word of the Lord to the chosen people ... I mean these were the Hebrew people – the Israelites that God had called and led out of slavery in Egypt and had given the promised land. These are the same people who were the descendants of Father Abraham and Mother Sara. The Chosen People!

And these same people were about to be held again in captivity – the land taken from them, the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem destroyed.

It was so difficult to believe they – God's chosen – could lose God's favor. And when they were exiled into Babylonia, one of the hardest things was for them to feel they had lost their relationship with God, which of course, they really had not.

God did not give up on them, even when they were at their worst – even when it looked like they were doomed.

This is a call from God, the great Creator, through the prophet Jeremiah – a call for repentance. The Israelites had become as stiff as the clay the potter was working with. In some of the Scriptures the people are referred to as “stiff-necked.” They were not giving God their hearts and love; their will; their obedience.

This sounds, for us today to be harsh, doesn't it? We are so used to all the love verses – all the sayings about God being love, God of mercy, God of grace and forgiveness. Does this story from Jeremiah change your image of God?

But think about it ... I think this is a beautiful image of God. Remember in Genesis 2 – the second creation story – where we read of God taking up clay in the great Creator's hands and forming the image of a person and breathing that divine breath into the person – the A' dam - which means red clay.

Think of how we say in the committal service at the graveside of those beloved who have died – “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The beauty and the promise we see in these images of God as Potter, and us as clay, is that we are always in the Potter's hands. The Potter God is always molding us and shaping us into a new creation. We have chance after chance to become what God, the Creator, has in mind.

Even God, the great Creator, who is sovereign – that is, in control of everything in the universe – still gives us the opportunity to use our freedom to choose to change and to follow; to choose to allow the Creator to have his way with us.

Which is really what Jesus is giving as well. Jesus asks us to choose our priorities and to think carefully about that choice. If we want to follow him – to truly be his disciple – it might cost us dearly, because we could lose everything and everyone else dear to us.

Jesus, who, in other places tells us to love everyone, is surely not literally saying we should develop a hatred for our mother and father. He is surely not telling us we have to give away everything we own and live in hunger and poverty.

But he is telling us very candidly that if we are his disciple – then our hearts and everything we have belongs to him first and foremost. Because in really tough times, when our lives might be at stake, when we are losing our relationships – we must be able to truly, deeply trust Jesus and no one else.

God the Potter has in mind the very best for us. In fact, we hear later, God say “I know the plans I have for you ... plans for your welfare and not for harm; to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

If only we could really believe that God’s plan for our life; that Jesus’ plan for us as his disciples – would always, in every circumstance, be far better than anything we, ourselves, could plan – if we could completely believe that, we would find ourselves in that place of complete peace, hope and trust.

That is the shape the Potters hands are molding us to be. That is the perfect image the Potter has in mind for us.

It is an image for us individually. It is an image for us as the Church who follows Christ as our Head. It is an image that will become reality for the world when the Kingdom of God is finally complete.

In the meantime, we thank God that we are in the Potters Hands – a place where we are renewed and reshaped each time we begin to be too resistant. This is a Potter who never gives up on us and never lets us go.

The good news is that we are always being formed and reformed in the Potters Hands. May our prayer be as the hymn we sing – “Have Thine own way, Lord. Have Thine own way.”

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