

Lessons From the Potter: Redeemed and Beloved©

Isaiah 43:1-7, Romans 9:19-26

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

Today marks the fifth Sunday in our Lenten Journey. I'm curious about what you've been thinking and doing in this time. For some reason it seems like it's been a really long time since we began this journey on Ash Wednesday, the night of the ashes that remind us of our mortality, our weak, human state.

Have you been keeping up with the Lenten Meditation Guide? Have you done anything with your ball of clay? I noticed yesterday that most of them are gone. If you have made something, I'd love for you to bring it on Maundy Thursday and tell us, as we sit around the table, what insights you had.

I pray you have had some time to reflect and pray; to think about where you are in your spiritual journey during this time of Lent. We've said it before and it is important enough to repeat: Lent is a time for being a bit more reflective; for looking back over the year and seeing if we have moved – even slightly – from our close walk with Jesus.

Lent is a time for admitting to Him the places where we have sinned; a time for repenting – for turning around and going a different way – the way of righteousness – God's way.

And of course, through it all, we keep our eyes ahead to what we know is so important. It is the thing we are most grateful for (or should be), the thing that we Christians believe is the most important, amazing event that changed everything.

It is the thing that gives us courage to be able to go to the One who created us, to trust him, to believe it when he says we are forgiven for those sins. We are made clean. We become a new creation in his sight. It is, of course, wrapped up in the cruelty of an old rugged cross; in the horrific torture that God's Son, Jesus, went through, for us.

In the crucifixion of Christ, we somehow come to know that we are forgiven, that mercy and grace take the place of our own punishment for the sins we know are ours, in our humanity.

Last week, the sermon focus was to be on redemption. Of course, I was sick, and I thank the good Lord for such a wonderful Associate Pastor who was able and willing to step right in for me.

So, I changed the sermon title to include redemption for this morning because being redeemed and being beloved absolutely goes together.

See, we are God's people – not because of anything good we have done but because of his grace, his sheer love and mercy. The dictionary defines *redemption* as:

1. The action of saving or being saved from sin, error or evil.
2. the action of regaining, or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt."

It goes against our modern, enlightened ways of thinking, yet somehow it remains true, I believe. When God created humans it was with a perfect plan of relationship between the two. God gave everything for humans to enjoy – especially that communion with God.

But it didn't take long for humans to decide they, themselves, wanted to be God. They turned from God and did their own thing. Anytime we turn from God, we sin. Humans broke the relationship between the Creator and us, the created.

We read in the Old Testament that God chose a people to work God's power and salvation through – the Israelites. Were they a perfect group of people? Nope. They were a long way from it. But they were the people God chose to be his examples; to work his power and love through for the world.

But still, the relationship was flawed because of sin; sin that, no matter how hard people might try, they continued to fall back into. And Paul says, in Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death..."

So if death was what we rightly deserved because of sin – because of turning away from God, of our determination to be the one in control, to live as we want instead of guided by God and God's plan – God's law, then God had lost us, his children. We were lost from that loving, perfect relationship with our Creator – by our own doing.

But then, we read in John, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17:¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

We will never be able to understand the amazing love that God has shown us by sending his perfect Son, Jesus, to earth, to be just like us, only without any sin whatsoever, and yet, he died this criminal's death. In our place. A death that could have been us; should have been us, because of our sinfulness.

We, who were lost, have been found again. We who were far from Home – the Home of our loving Creator's presence – have been redeemed. Found and healed; restored – not by anything we did, but by what God did in Jesus for us.

The entire verse of Romans 6:23 says: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Redemption and salvation are impossible to completely understand. We can think about it until we drive ourselves crazy and sometimes we can even talk ourselves out of believing it because it all seems so ancient and almost barbaric.

But the point is that somehow God, sending his perfect Son, Jesus, to come to earth and teach us about who God is, about God’s love and desire to have us close; about God’s leaning toward grace so much more than toward condemnation; and then being willing to give the ultimate sacrifice of love for us – death on a cross – somehow we become forgiven; somehow we become God’s children forever.

God said, way back in Isaiah – that God promised to go with us through all kinds of trials; to be with us in the depths of our fears – of all that threatens us – God, promises to go with us, to redeem us, to save us from it all. God knows our name. God loves us.

It is not a promise that nothing bad or evil will ever happen to us, but it is a promise that God will be with us and see us through it – get us to the other side of it.

Paul writes in the passage in Romans 9 about God using God’s wisdom – not ours, and not a wisdom we would even understand most of the time – to work out God’s plan of salvation.

Paul uses the image of pottery saying that the created pot – the clay – has no right to ask the potter why he made it that way. It is the potters right to make each one for his own use.

I brought these two bowls today to continue the lessons from the potter. One bowl, the larger, lovelier bowl often sits on our dining room table with fresh, delicious inviting fruit in it.

It is not perfect, but it is lovely to look at, I think. I wish I had made it ... but I did not. It was a special gift to me, made by the granddaughter of a former parishioner, back when I was a student pastor. I have protected it and enjoyed it and found it useful as well as lovely.

The smaller bowl is one that I made. It was one of my first projects on the wheel, when I was taking pottery classes. I actually made quite a few bowls of this size and shape.

I sent most of them to family members as little gifts and I see most of them sitting on a little table somewhere in their house with small items in them – keys, batteries, chewing gum, maybe a wadded up kleenex – you know, those little odds and ends that you aren’t sure what to do with.

One could argue that this little bowl isn't as important as the bigger one. But, it's as useful as the other. And in its own way, it's just as lovely. At least it is in its creator's eye.

This little bowl went through as much as the bigger one did. They both were stretched and pulled; molded and formed with hands that were lovingly creating, by a potter who had hopes of making something that in the end would be useful and lovely.

Both of these bowls were trimmed with sharp tools and exposed to great heat and yet, they made it through.

You see, Paul's point is that God uses us all for his purpose; for his good, his plan for salvation – not just for the Jews – the original chosen people, but for us who are Gentiles as well. Listen to how Peterson translates it in *The Message*:

Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question? Clay doesn't talk back to the fingers that mold it, saying, "Why did you shape me like this?" Isn't it obvious that a potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking beans?

If God needs one style of pottery especially designed to show his angry displeasure and another style carefully crafted to show his glorious goodness, isn't that all right? Either or both happens to Jews, but it also happens to the other people. Hosea put it well:

I'll call nobodies and make them somebodies;
 I'll call the unloved and make them beloved.
 In the place where they yelled out, "You're nobody!"
 they're calling you "God's living children."

You are loved. You are God's beloved. It's true what they say – "God doesn't make junk." You are beautiful in the Creator's eyes.

And I want to finish with how *The Message* translates this last part:

Paul goes on to say that Isaiah maintained this same emphasis:

If each grain of sand on the seashore were numbered
 and the sum labeled "chosen of God,"
 They'd be numbers still, not names;
 salvation comes by personal selection.
 God doesn't count us; he calls us by name.
Arithmetic is not his focus.

God, your Creator, has called you by name. You are redeemed – found, brought back home to his loving, forgiving, gracious presence where you will abide throughout eternity because of his love for you.

We too, are his people. Whatever God had to do, he did just to make us his chosen people, as well as the Israelites. And you – and we – the followers of Jesus, the ones who are saved by grace, and grace alone, are useful to him as we share his love and grace – as we spread the Good News that is for all the world because of his love shown through Jesus, our Savior.

And don't you ever, ever doubt it – you are loved and you are lovely – beautiful in your Creator's eye.

Thanks be to God for ever and ever for Jesus Christ our Lord who died for us and rose for us so we might be called children of God. Amen and Amen.

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