DCCCP 9/4/22 In the Hands of the Potter

Did you ever take a pottery class, say in middle school or high school? What a humbling experience.

A simple lump of clay on a spinning wheel and - bam – you’re covered with clay and water and that lump of clay has transformed into a lump of clay with an uneven hole in it. It’s not the beautiful bowl you had in mind. That was my experience in 9th grade. Mrs. Lansing, my teacher, did not suggest I consider a career in artful pottery.

Jeremiah was a profit in Jerusalem around 600 BCE (between 650 and 585 BCE). Many believe he was called by God to be a prophet at about the same age where pottery rejected me at 16.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jeremiah 1 verse 4 begins:

*4 The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” 7 But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord. 9 Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth.*

Jeremiah said “I am too young”. God said, “I knew you before I formed you and set you apart”. These words are echoed in our first reading from Psalm 139 verse 13: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” Both writers honor the sovereignty in God’s design.

Jeremiah was appointed to bring a strong word to the Hebrew people. God was setting boundaries, establishing limits and telling the prophet what God’s plans were for the Lord’s nation if they would not repent. The lord was raising an army to harshly judge the people of Judah, the army of Babylon. But God’s people would not listen, for they were a “stiff-necked” people.

The conventional way of looking at this passage of the potter at his wheel is to see God as re-shaping us into the image God desires. But this is not what the passage is saying at all.

The Potter being observed is not God, he is simply an object lesson for the prophet. When the potter mars the clay in his hands it is not like God mars us in his hands.

The clay represents God’s plans for nation of Israel, God’s intention. The clay is God’s will, God’s purposes. The clay is reflecting back on God’s decisions about his people.

But there is a problem. We are not accustomed to thinking about the divine mind changing, of God’s plans being anything other than set in motion, immutable, and unchangeable. But doesn’t this idea of unchangeability put the God of infinite power and possibility in a box, limiting God’s opportunity for change?

There are a number of passages in God’s book that point to the actual changeability of God.

Here’s a cpuple other examples:

* 1 Samuel 15:29 says: The Glory of Israel will not deceive or change his mind. This was just after God changed his mind about Saul and removed him from his kingship. (1 Samuel 15:10)
* Mal 3:6 For I the Lord do not change. This was just after God once again accepted a pleasing offering “as in the days of old” after refusing offerings before. (Mal 3:4)

Last week we were reminded that we interpret scripture through the lens of our conscience. What does that lens tell us now? Can human actions change God’s plans?
Each of these passages expresses a change of heart by the God of man. Through Jeremiah, God is very clearly saying “if you want to see my plans change, well, then your plans must change”.

This scripture came at a time of incredible angst for the Hebrew nation: they had lost their way, they were being threatened by other nations, particularly Babylon, who was on the march across the known world – swallowing up whole nations; the dark clouds on the horizon we’re pretty threatening.

These people were asking important questions about God, and Jeremiah was answering them. How did we get here, they said? How could this happen to the people of God?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hadn’t God saved them before? But Jeremiah told them that they had turned from the Lord, and he told them they could turn back again. But no one was listening.

In another OT book, the Lord drove Jonah to witness to the sinful people in Nineveh. And they, unlike Judah, repented and wept to God and the Lord relented in their punishment.

These passages represent the malleability of God’s will, responding to our faith and our actions. The truth of God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The same cannot be said of God’s plans.

But by Jeremiah’s words, God doesn’t change plans, without us changing direction.

When in your own story has God used events in your life to reshape you.

I’m not asking, when has God changed the outcome of your existence to change you but when has God used your outcome to lead you to change? Have you had what seemed like a curse re-shaped, like the potter’s clay, into a blessing because of changes you have made? [[3]](#footnote-3)

God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt because of God’s righteousness, not because the slaves in Egypt demonstrated any particular faithfulness. In fact, they had to be dragged kicking and screaming into faithfulness. (Exodus 3:7–8)

Jeremiah gave Israel an offer that took into account obedience and disobedience, sin and repentance[[4]](#footnote-4) yet it was refused over and over again. The Lord would eventually bring the Hebrew nation back to their home, from Babylon, but not before lessons were learned.

In this scene, God’s words of judgment and warning are placed in the context of the potter’s house. The sights, sounds, and smells of the potter are unique.

The dust of the clay mingled with the water, the sound of the wheel, the feel of the malleable clay, all things that speak to the humanity of the scene.

God is not indifferent to our outcome but seeks to intervene.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the house of the potter, Jeremiah learns that God’s judgment on Israel can become good news, if the people change.

And we know this in the depths of our hearts, God’s vision for our future is greater than our vision for our future.

Many people list as their favorite verse Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

God knows that we are capable of so many things, so much more than we think.

We all have within us the capacity for change, the potential for transformation and redirection and to realize God’s plans. The common watchword of redirection; used by Jeremiah and by Jesus is repent; to turn from the path you are on. Where Jeremiah foretells potential disaster, Jesus foretells a potential for reshaping ourselves by his resurrection. Where Jeremiah says “turn from your evil ways, Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Mat 4:17)

Psalm 139 also speaks the language of potential, the potential that sometimes lies dormant, waiting to come alive. These verses speak of this type of potential, that God knew me before I knew me; “you have searched me Lord, and you know me”.

God knows us as the clay of the potter, the made of the maker, like a caterpillar waiting to change into a butterfly. God knows our potential is set free through personal change, by getting to know our maker and our savior in our heart.

God is like a potter and so are we. We form and reform ourselves and this church all the time. In fact, the Presbyterian church’s tradition is anchored by the phrase: reformed and always reforming.[[6]](#footnote-6)

God is not bound, either to our tradition or to our particular contemporary context but God is with us as we change, as we reform.

So, why does the church need reforming? Because God is a living God forming and reforming us throughout our lives.

Every time we bring someone new into the church family we change the make-up of the church, we add flare to the pottery that is us. We have a couple people joining the church in the next week or so. By their inclusion we will be reshaping what Dunn’s Corners looks like, who the church is. Their beliefs will help shape ours and ours, theirs. Reformed and always reforming.

But, it’s not like they just drove by the church and decided one day to drop in. That really does not often happen. They were asked by other church members to give it a try. They were invited, and as you well know, life inside the family of the church is such a blessing.

A life without the experience of a church family, a God family, is a sadder life, I think.

A life without communal singing of hymns to God, of fellowshipping over coffee, of opening to biblical truths you had never considered, of seeing the clear water of baptism sprinkled on a baby, of a hug shared when someone dearly loved has died or is seriously ill, of casserole dishes and finger sandwiches shared in community, and of gathering under one purpose in a warm building on a cold morning with loving people.

But here’s the hard part; we are not just called to seek our friends, that is easy. Jesus said “…go and make disciples of all nations” and “…you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

When he told his disciples that, I rather doubt they really wanted to hear it because, off of that short list Jesus gave them, there were a lot of enemies, a lot of bad dudes.

But Jesus did not leave us with examples of his seeking out just a small niche group of friends in society. He discipled everyone, friend and enemy alike. He discipled all of God’s children.

There is little more that I can think of that draws these ideas of potential, of forming and reforming, and of shaping our godly outcome through our own actions, than the Romans 12 concept of transformation. And what could be a more challenging transformation than seeing even our enemy as our neighbor and then learning to love our enemy as ourselves?

Our guidebook, the bible, tells us to bless those who persecute us; bless and do not curse, if hungry, give our enemy something to eat, if thirsty, give our enemy something to drink, in everything we do - overcome evil with good.

We are called by God to do God’s work for the Lord’s people here on earth, throughout our lives. This includes everyone who is our neighbor – which happens to include everyone. Jesus did not accept the nails of a cross so that we could sit idly by; he cleared our sin record for action. Jeremiah gave Israel an option, Jesus gave us an opportunity.

He said to us, to His people: if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.

Reformed and always reforming, transformed to overcome evil with good. The hands of Jesus, here on earth, giving the Lord a reason to bless the lives we lead.

May God be blessed in all we do.

Amen.

1. When Did Jeremiah Begin His Ministry? <https://explainingthebook.com/2016/01/23/when-did-jeremiah-begin-his-ministry/> accessed 9/2/22 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Clifford, *Proper 18, Jeremiah 18:1-11,* Connections, Year C Vol 3, Westminster Press, 287 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Steagald, ED David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, vol. 4 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), *Theological Perspective*, 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bruce Birch, Feasting on the Word, *Exegetical Perspective*, 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sally Brown, Feasting on the Word, *Homiletical Perspective*, 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Anna Case-Winters,* *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda (Church reformed, always reforming) Our Misused Motto,*Presbyterian Mission Agency, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ecclesia-reformata/> accessed 9/1/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)