

Sermon for Sunday – September 4, 2022
Jeremiah 18:1-11

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and our thoughts be acceptable to you O God, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Once upon a time in ancient China there was a young monk who drew water from the well and carried it back to the temple everyday. The young monk carried 2 buckets of water slung on a bamboo pole across his shoulders.

One of the buckets was perfect while the other one was a leaky bucket with several holes in its 'sides. Every time the young monk filled up the two buckets and got back to the temple, the leaky bucket would be half empty, as water sprinkled out through the holes on its side.

The leaky bucket was sad that it was imperfect, and water was leaking from its sides. One day on the way to the well the leaky bucket plucked up enough courage and spoke with the young monk with an apologetic tone said;

“Master I am sorry that I am imperfect and could not keep the water from sprinkling through the holes on my sides.”

The young monk smiled and nodded his head knowingly. When at the well the young monk drew the water and filled up the two buckets as usual, on the way back to the temple the young monk said to the leaky bucket, who was very quiet; “look to the side of the road where the perfect bucket passed over, it is barren not even a blade of grass grows here.

Pointing to the blooming flowers on the other side of the road the young monk said to the leaky bucket, “see these beautiful flowers these are here only because of the water you sprinkled on them everyday, they owe

their existence to you - we are able to enjoy these beautiful flowers because of you. ///

How is your bucket?

My bucket feels a bit leaky these days and I'm not sure **that - if** you looked along the path - on the side where the water is leaking out of my bucket - you will see a lovely, manicured edge, of brightly coloured flowers.

How about you?

These past two and a half years have been hard. They have been hard on many of us. We leaked like we have never leaked before. We have added a few extra holes, dents and chips. I feel this personally and I feel this as we are church together.

In this week's Hebrew Bible or Old Testament lesson, that Cal read for us - God invites Jeremiah to take his leaky bucket and enter a potter's shed and there observe the potter working with clay, God invites Jeremiah to the potters shed so that Jeremiah may better hear God's words, understand God's way, and get advice about how to rouse God's people to new action.

Jeremiah is, according to the lesson, encouraged to leave his familiar spaces, his routine and traditions, to step away from the professional development seminars, and instead learn about God and God's people by watching an artist at work.

What does it mean for us to visit the potter's shed? Or watch the painter mix her paints and fill her canvas in the open air. Feel the weaver's coarse-spun wool as she weaves her tapestry of richly colored threads. Smell the shavings in the woodworker's garage as he shapes and matches the joints that will secure board to board. Hear the songwriter test chord progressions and lyrical phrases as they scribble, strum, and hum. **Well**

when we visit, watch, feel, smell and hear - then we will learn something new ourselves, about God and we will hear afresh the call to be God's people.

Some scriptures invite us to imagine God as ruler and judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father, mother, and lover. Jeremiah 18 invites us to see God as an artisan and artist. The image is not new in the scriptures. Genesis 1 portrays God as the first poet, designer, metalworker, and landscaper – in Genesis 1 - God speaks, divides, fashions, and populates the cosmos. In Genesis 2: verse 7 God first shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. As God's hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, God breathes life into God's new creation, so that the human being is simultaneously grounded by this connection to earth and animated by the very breath of God.

In Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once and for all but rather, God tells Jeremiah, that the people are like clay that has not yet been fired.

There is a difference between clay that has been fired and clay that has not yet been fired. It is this: clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape. It may be decorative, and functional, but it is most often designed for a single purpose — a brick or tile, bowl or plate, a mug, a vase, a pitcher, a storage jar, a lamp. It is easy to break. Fired clay creates a dry ceramic, it is lovely and it is useful but it is also rigid and brittle.

Clay that has not been fired is flexible. It may be shaped and reshaped over and over again - infinitely. It is a material of possibility: a material that is mouldable, adaptable, responsive.

The great mystery is that God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils – but God did not fire the clay from which God made us. No one of us is only a tile, a pitcher, or a lamp. God is able to shape us and reshape us, and God labors tirelessly at the wheel on our behalf. God assesses our character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and, when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.

The question for me this morning is; do I trust God to reshape me in this new time? Do I trust God to reshape our church? Do you?

After Jeremiah's visit to the potter's shed, and after God explains to Jeremiah just how God is a potter and just how God's people are like clay in God's hands and that God is able to re-create these people, God changes gears and begins to talk about God's plan for nations and kingdoms.

God's plans for a nation, a people, or a kingdom, God explains, are not fixed, and they are not determined apart from our own choices. On one hand, God's good plan to build up a people may be thwarted by their choice to do what is evil. On the other hand, God may plan to pull down a kingdom that has made itself great on the backs of the oppressed, but if that nation turns from its evil, God may change God's mind concerning the destruction planned. Just as we, the unfired clay, respond to the potter's touch, to water, and to the wheel, so God responds to us.

And so we see that at the heart of this biblical passage is the complex interaction between God the artist and maker on one hand, and, on the other, God's people, who are like clay in God's hands, but are also so much more. God cannot make us do anything. God cannot *make*

us use our gifts or choose the good. Nor can God direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose if we do not also choose them.

We are neither robots nor closed circuits. The shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. We remain supple. We are susceptible to influence, suggestion, temptation, and corruption. We are also resilient, and capable of astonishing goodness and true transformation.

At the conclusion of this passage, God asks Jeremiah — **asks**, not commands, and even says “please” — God asks Jeremiah to speak to the people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, to encourage them to change. God has planned an end for the kingdom of Judah, but even this future is not fixed. Just as the potter returns to the wheel, so God asks the people to return — please — each one, for it is together that we can create something new.

As I consider my leaky bucket, I find comfort in knowing that God and I are in this together. It is with God that I will find new ways to be fully alive in this new time. I like the idea that I may need to spend some time in the potter’s house. I am excited to think about what God and I will create together.

I am excited to think about what you and God will create in your life. How about you?

And I am excited to think about what God will create with us in our church, our communities and in our world if we Go – get up and go to the potter’s house.

Last week Brian invited us to remove our bushel basket and to shine, and I couldn't agree with him more but shining requires more than wishful thinking. We need to tend to our spirits, we need to move, we need to try new things, we need to go down to the Potters house, we need to be willing to be transformed, recreated so the light is good. And the side of the path that is ours - is a beautiful, vibrant, and a life giving gift.

Amen

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

May God bless to our understanding and our living these words of scripture. Amen