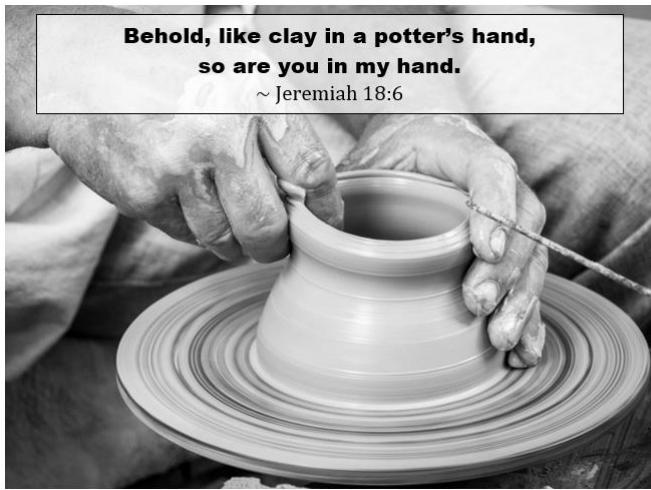


GOD RECYCLES CRACKED POTS!

**Behold, like clay in a potter's hand,
so are you in my hand.**
~ Jeremiah 18:6



Scripture:

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

¹The 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.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



GOD RECYCLES CRACKED POTS

First of all, I realized you all might be wondering why we apply God's words to the people of the house of Israel to us today? Basically, the relationship between God and Israel is a metaphor for God's relationship with all of humanity.

A simple understanding of the Old Testament is that it is a record of ancient writings about the relationship of humanity with God. The Old Testament is a collection of writings composed and edited by members of the Hebrew-Jewish community between the twelfth century B.C. and the beginning of the Christian era. It includes prophetic oracles, divine instructions, ancient recordings of historical events, and the story of God's purpose for the world. Most of the literature was written in Hebrew, but a few passages were written in Aramaic. In seminary we had to learn Hebrew in order to interpret these ancient writings from their source documents.

OLD COVENANT AND NEW COVENANT

The term "Old Testament," is thought of as the "Old Covenant," that Moses received from God. The "new covenant" mentioned in Jeremiah 31 was fulfilled in Jesus coming to earth. The New Testament scriptures describe the "new covenant" which was clearly made between God and both Jews and Gentiles. (A Gentile is anyone who is not Jewish). The Bible, as we know it today, has a long literary history. It reflects, for our understanding, historical situations, human events, human reactions to these events, and the belief that God was involved in all of them. The first five books of the Old Testament is called the Pentateuch (Greek) or the Torah (Hebrew). They are also known as the Books of the Law. These books begin to tell the story of God in relationship with all of creation, including humans.

JEREMIAH

So we are to understand from today's passage (which is a prophetic writing from the prophet Jeremiah), that he is describing our relationship with God, too. Not just God's relationship with the people of Israel.

In Judaism, the Book of Jeremiah is considered part of their sacred writings along with the Torah. Christians often quote the prophecies of Jeremiah as

well. Even Islam considers Jeremiah a major prophet worthy of teaching us lessons that apply to our lives today.

Sometimes Jeremiah is called the "Weeping Prophet" because he lived during a difficult era in Biblical history when Israel was being very disobedient to God and suffering great calamities such as the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Even though much of Jeremiah is sad to read, there are many important lessons to learn from Jeremiah who uses colorful imagery and visceral ways to explain his prophecies.

First he wrote about his reluctant anointing as a prophet as it is recorded in Jeremiah 1: "Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, (God speaking) 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

THE POTTER

And when Jeremiah complains that he doesn't have the ability or courage to speak, God tells him to "gird up his loins" and stand up to the people of Israel on behalf of God. There is fleshy physicality in his words that give you a real sense of the deep relationship Jeremiah had with his potter, our God.

Here in this passage today, Jeremiah uses the potter and the clay imagery to explain how God can still mold and shape us to be what we are meant to be.

This lesson reminded me of a book I read years ago by Patsy Clairmont called "*God Uses Cracked Pots*." She has such a fun way of describing how God calls the imperfect, the damaged, and the broken. Clairmont humorously reassures those of us who have become chipped and cracked due to mistakes or hardship that we are even better able to share hope in God to others who have also been damaged over time. Her book tells one funny story after another about how God loves us unconditionally, flaws and all. "Normal is just a setting on the washer."

THE CRACKED POT

Even Jeremiah thought he was too broken to be a prophet for God. But God showed him he was the right person for the job at that time.

E.B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little* said, "Genius is more often found in a cracked pot than in a whole one."

The Japanese have a beautiful way of dealing with cracks and imperfections.



"When the Japanese mend broken objects, they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold. They believe that when something's suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful."

Billie Mobayed

And the Chinese have an ancient story about a positive way to view our flaws and imperfections too. It is called 'The Cracked Pot.' There once was an elderly Chinese woman who had two large water pots, each hanging on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck.

One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream: "I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house."

The old woman smiled and said, "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because

I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace our house."

THE CLAY AND THE POTTER

The Bible uses the clay and the potter imagery in thirty-four verses. Here are a few.

In Isaiah 64, the prophet Isaiah said to God, "We are the clay you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand."

In the New Testament, Romans 9:20-21 says, "But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?"

And in 2 Corinthians 4, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

IMAGINE

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine you are a cherished lump of soft clay in God's hands. God has been shaping and molding you for a very long time, making you into a special vessel to carry faith, hope, and love out into the world. Feel God's warm hands massaging you into shape, gently caressing and admiring you in the palm of her hands.

Think of all you have been through in your life, all the time you were chipped, or broken or cracked in some way. And God kept working with you, applying that gold paint to help you be even stronger and more beautiful as you aged. Or maybe God left some of your broken places of pain and struggle open so a light could shine through giving others hope for their future. Maybe God reshaped and recycled some of your parts that were damaged when you went astray for awhile along a path that caused self-destruction.

God has been continually working with you, shaping and transforming you over these years in

your life into what you are today. And yet, God isn't finished with you yet. There is more to come. (Open your eyes.)

How have you responded to the shaping and molding you have been through over these past years? Reluctantly? Gratefully?

Professor Jo Bailey Wells teaches Old Testament at Duke Divinity School. She says, In Jeremiah 18, it is the responsiveness of the clay that matters. "The Bible depicts God's relationship with people as a genuine relationship because it is responsive. How people respond to God matters to God, and affects how God responds to people. The divine relationship is analogous to human relationships which are necessarily mutual and developing (or else withering away)."

Our God is engaging us in a relationship constantly always seeking to evoke a response, such as "Thank you," and "I love you." The potter responds to what the clay presents.

Karl Barth called this the "holy mutability of God." Barth believed our God: "...is the living God . . . who possesses a mobility and elasticity which is no less divine than God's perseverance."

Professor Wells goes on to say, "This potter does not function arbitrarily; there is far too much investment in the clay for that. Rather, God responds to the moral or immoral actions of people."

May we be conscious of how we are responding to our potter today. How is your relationship with God? Is it withering or vital? May we respond with deep gratitude by taking good care of our precious clay pots physically and spiritually so they will continue to last and be useful for carrying God's truth and love.

And like Jeremiah, let's stay pliable so God can continue to shape us into the vessels he wants us to be. The only way for us to become all God desires us to be is to remain pliable in the Potter's hands. Amen.

We are the clay, and God is our potter; all of us are the work of God's hand.

God knows how we are made and that we need grace, and mercy and sustenance to carry on in life.

This meal reminds us that we were created with sacrificial unconditional love.

Jesus still calls us to 'Come all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.'

All who seek to trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior are invited to partake in this simple meal of love that he has prepared.

Benediction:

Brothers and sisters, God loves cracked pots. God cherishes broken people.

We are all broken in some way. But God uses broken things, like the bread and the fish that he broke and multiplied to feed thousands, like the bread that was broken for you today that represented the body of Christ.

God calls each of us to teach the broken who don't know that the love of Christ can be the gold paint that mends and strengthens our broken lives.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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Invitation to the Communion table: