

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 8, 2019
Jeremiah 18:1-11 & Luke 14:25-33

Growing up in North Carolina, I was surrounded by art – both the folk arts as well as fine arts. Back home, it seems that everyone is either a potter, quilter, weaver, painter, or sculptor, and there seems to be a studio or gallery on every street corner. In addition, both of my parents were collectors and my childhood homes were always filled with paintings, sculpture, and pottery.

I grew up going to galleries and museums, and my parents taught me at a young age how to behave properly in them. I remember one gallery my father and I frequented regularly all through my childhood. As you walked in the door, there was a sign posted – one that I’ll never forget – which said, “Unattended children often become collectors”. In other words, watch your children or you will be buying whatever they break or damage! To this day, when I walk into any studio, gallery, or museum, I still habitually put my hands in my pockets (elbows in!) or clasp them behind my back.

Sculpture and pottery are art forms that particularly capture my attention. I find the three-dimensional character of it fascinating. I like the textures, colors, shapes and patterns. I like that you can walk around it and see multiple sides. I like touching them – feeling the surfaces, curves, angles, and textures. There are pottery studios all around the part of North Carolina where I grew up; no doubt the clay soil indigenous to the area has something to do with this.

I also find it fascinating to watch sculptors at their work: carving, chipping, or shaving down the material, only to reveal the beautiful form that lived within, unnoticed by anyone but the artist. And I especially like watching potters throwing clay at the pottery wheel – the way they mold and draw forth from a lump of undefined clay something both useful and beautiful. It is hypnotic the way they move when at the wheel: slowly and deliberately, with each subtle bit of pressure and angling causing immediate and significant change to the shape of the clay.

And there is a reciprocity to this art form – the potter and the clay each responding to each other. The potter continually alters his actions and shaping techniques based on how the clay responds. Sometimes this reciprocity means that the potter collapses the shape entirely and begins again because the clay had become misshapen and uneven in a way that will ultimately make the vessel unusable.

Our Jeremiah lesson this morning uses the image of the potter and clay as a metaphor for God – the divine potter – who shapes and reshapes his beloved Israel. The Lord sends the prophet Jeremiah down to the potter’s house to observe the artist working at his wheel. The potter, focused on drawing forth his intended vessel from the clay, finds the clay becoming misshapen and so he collapses and reworks it into something new. God then explains to Jeremiah that this is similar to how God works and reworks his chosen community of faith, drawing forth and shaping Israel into his intended vessel.

This metaphor of the divine potter and the willing and obedient community of faith reflects the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. The mutuality inherent in the relationship between the potter and the clay is also present within the nature of God’s relationship with Israel – a relationship that is bound by covenant but not fixed. The blessings promised by God are not an unconditional guarantee. God can collapse the vessel of Israel if its shape is not what God intended as covenant partner.

It is important to note that a covenant is different than a promise. A promise is an agreement made from one partner to another – it is necessarily unidirectional. As in: *“I promise to keep the house clean.”* A covenant, on the other hand, is by its very nature reciprocal – it is an agreement entered into between two partners who each agree to uphold certain promises. *“I promise to keep the house clean as you promise to keep the car running.”*

In our Hebrew scriptures, God enters into covenant with Israel such that God promises to bless, provide for, and protect the people of Israel. And Israel promises to worship and obey God and to act with justice and mercy. Because of this reciprocity, the covenantal relationship is conditional. It can be broken – the vessel began by the potter can be destroyed. As Israel is disobedient to God, Israel damages and breaks the covenant. And God responds by tearing it down and drawing forth a renewed and reshaped community.

In Christianity, the metaphor of the divine potter is largely understood as a private or individual shaping. It is often employed in a prayer for personal transformation, like in the well-known hymn, “You are the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, have Thine own way.” In Jeremiah, however, this metaphor means something more expansive and comprehensive – that of the chosen community of faith. The covenantal framework at work in Jeremiah makes clear that God intends to shape the life of the called community, not merely the individual, to serve God’s divine purposes. As the potter is intently focused on drawing forth from the clay the intended vessel, God is likewise invested in our common life, continually shaping and reshaping this shared life until it is transformed into God’s just and merciful community of faith.

There is a certain pliability and willingness that is necessary for this divine molding of us. On an individual level, Jesus speaks of this molding as discipleship. Our lesson from the Gospel of Luke this morning is a hard one to hear. Jesus pulls no punches and he makes clear the costly requirements of this discipleship: let go of your treasured relationships, give up all possessions, and walk the path that leads to the cross. It seems that discipleship, according to Jesus, is an all or nothing deal. We must give up all of our attachments to things, the love of others, personal safety and security, and any notion of control over anything other than our own actions and the state of our hearts.

This doesn’t happen in an instant, it is an ongoing process of transformation. We are like the clay in the hands of the potter – being shaped and, as flaws emerge that mar our integrity, we are reshaped into vessels of God’s grace. The theologian Emilie Townes puts it this way: “Discipleship is a process that takes time and involves both false starts (and restarts) and modest successes, as we grow in our faith journeys to live into the fullness of our humanity and dare to live the holiness that resides in us.”¹

As much as we might wish otherwise, it seems that Jesus is serious when he says we must give up our possessions in order to place as most important our relationship with God and following the way of Jesus. And even worse than that, the possessions to which Jesus refers are more than just things – they include our deepest human relationships; our need to acquire; our yearning for success; our petty jealousies; our prejudices and need to denigrate others; our fears and hatred; and so on.² Possessions such as these make us resistant and less pliable to God’s shaping and they become the obstacles that prevent us from walking the path Christ calls us to.

At the heart of discipleship is transformation. Transformation of us individually as disciples of Christ, allowing God to draw forth the deep inner divine image imprinted within each one of us. As well as transformation of God’s called community of faith, being shaped and molded into God’s intended vessels of divine love and justice.³

This willingness to submit to God’s reshaping does not come naturally – we need God’s help to do it. There is a special prayer I was given years ago when I was struggling to climb out of my personal morass of depression and addiction. Through therapy, recovery, and the love and grace of God, I was torn down and re-worked into something new and vital. I won’t lie to you and say it was a pleasant experience, but for me it brought about a powerful transformation and this prayer

¹ Towns, Emilie M.; *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, John Knox Press (2010; Louisville, KY); p. 46

² Ibid

³ Brown, Sally A.; *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, John Knox Press (2010; Louisville, KY); p. 31

played an important role in that. Composed by Father Thomas Keating, the Welcoming Prayer is a prayer of continual consent to God's presence and action in our daily lives. I offer this prayer to you now.

Let us pray.

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within.

Amen.