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“The Potter’s Hands”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

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Jeremiah 18:1-11

I can’t remember the *first* time I ever saw a potter at the wheel. I am sure it must have been on a television show or as I passed by a booth at the state fair, or some other such place where I didn’t pay much attention to what I was seeing.

I do remember—and remember well—the first time I really saw a potter at a wheel—really looked at what happened with the clay, as strong, but gentle hands formed the clay into a work of art.

It was my own version of this story from Jeremiah:

I was in Montreat, NC, at the Worship and Music Conference when God called out to me, as to Jeremiah—“Come on, Mindy. Come on down to the potter’s house down by Lake Susan, and there I will let you hear my words.”

So I went down to the potter’s house, known around Montreat as the Sally Jones Craft House, and there I found many potters, all gathered on the second floor, men, women, teens and a few children who had come to create something out of nothing—a creation of their own imagining out of a lump of clay. I breathed in the smell of clay and sweat and dust. I swayed this way and that in order to avoid the bodies bustling busily around me, intent on gathering their clay or preparing their wheel for operation.

In one corner a woman worked intently, oblivious to the chaos around her. I stopped to watch. She took a formless lump of clay, wet it with water and then threw it down hard on the wheel. This, I later learned, was called centering, and it had to be done just right. If the clay wasn't exactly centered, the whole process wouldn't work, and the vessel would fall apart.

I watched as the potter started her wheel turning, wrapped her hands around the wet clay and bent over it, holding the clay in her hands, firmly, strongly but almost tenderly. Everything the potter did was done with care and intentionality, skill and patience until the formless lump began to take shape, slowly, but surely. I could tell that the potter had a vision for what the creation would be! The form changed and grew under her hands. She brought the clay up. She moved the clay out. She added water if the clay started to get dry. She was focused intently on her creation and as I watched, the formless lump of clay became a beautiful, perfectly formed bowl. Finally, the wheel slowed to a stop and she set her hands on her knees and leaned back to look at what she had done. The creation she had envisioned was complete.

As a newcomer, I was fascinated by this entire process and stood watching different potters create beautiful works of art in different corners of the craft house.

Soon, I found someone who would teach me. This gifted potter showed me over and over again how to hold my hands, how to fix errors, how to pull the clay up or push the clay down. I discovered how incredibly difficult the whole process really was (the pros had made it look so easy!). I fought back the feelings of inadequacy and frustration. That darn clay didn't seem to want to do a thing I was trying to make it do! It wanted to go its own way, do its own thing. I'd pull it up. It would fall down. I would try to thicken the walls; inevitably they would get too thin. I would try to make the rim even and symmetrical, but it seemed to have a mind of its own. I tried unsuccessfully to control it and as a result experienced numerous failed attempts. My lumps of clay were not becoming works of art. I was a long way from being a master potter.

But then my teacher returned. She put her hands around mine and guided them. She knew when to be strong and firm and then she knew when to back off and be

gentle and let the clay speak its own word. With her guidance, a beautiful bowl took shape right in front of me. I was amazed and humbled.

Today's scripture passage invites us to see God as potter, God as loving creator and laborer.

Other scriptures [writes Duke Divinity School professor Anatheia Portier-Young] 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, as God speaks, divides, fashions, and populates the cosmos. In Genesis 2:7, 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. Now, in Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once for all. To this day, God tells Jeremiah, God's people are like clay that has not yet been fired.¹

Unfired clay is like the clay Jane is working right now. It is malleable, soft, and ready to be formed.

...[C]lay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape.... It is easy to break. Such clay, now dry ceramic, is often lovely and as often useful. It is specialized. It is also rigid and brittle. Clay that has not been fired... may be shaped and reshaped infinitely. It is a material of possibility: moldable, flexible, responsive.

Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils [writes Portier-Young], God did not fire the clay from which she 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

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2972 (on 9-2-16)

character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and, when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.²

As I walked out of the pottery house that day in Montreat and made my way down by the lake and then by the creek to the house where I was staying, I thought about the experience I had had that day and what I had learned.

To begin with, I had learned that God, like the potter, makes something out of nothing. God, the Master Potter, did indeed bring life where there was no life, as in the first moments of Creation. God did indeed bring life where there was death, as at the moment of Jesus' resurrection and the empty tomb. But God's creative activities didn't stop there. As the Master Potter, God is active in our own lives and can and will and does also bring life where there is metaphorical death, as in those moments, days, and years of our own grief, of our own loss, of our own despair when we feel the darkness caving in upon us, as death. We forget sometimes that God brings life in such circumstances, don't we? We forget, as Sally Brown writes, that "...like the potter intent in drawing a useful vessel from the clay, God is deeply invested in our common life. The potter does not work aimlessly, nor does God. Every turn of the wheel matters. God means to shape us for purposes that often exceed our vision and imagination, and which most certainly exceed our typical preoccupations"³ with the maintenance of our lives.

This experience also taught me that there is an incredible close relationship between the potter and the clay, as God's covenantal relationship with God's people. The clay has its own mind (so to speak), as God's called community has its own mind. God's people sometimes choose to go their own way rather than to live into the covenant God has made with them. We, too, "can choose to align ourselves with God's redemptive purposes or pursue self-interested agendas." Can you guess which choices lead to life and fullness and peace (a useful and purposeful vessel)? Can you guess which choices lead to darkness and despair and death (a sad and useless lump of clay)?

² Portier-Young.

³ Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4*, Editors David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 29.

As we grow and change, we have opportunities every day to be molded and formed as God's people, to be guided by gentle but firm hands into the creation God has envisioned us to be. We have had opportunities in the past and we will have new opportunities in the future—we choose anew each to turn our hearts and minds toward God, open and willing to be molded and formed, formed and molded into the people of purpose and joy, into the community of faith, into a people who follow Christ and model the lives of those in covenant relationship with God in Christ each and every day.

How do we do this? How do we become clay ready to be formed by the Master Potter into something beautiful, strong, creative and faithful? I propose that we start by praying. That every morning as our eyes open and a new day stretches out before us we talk to God, remembering who God is as our Creator, and who we are as God's creation. We start by talking to God and asking God to mold and form us throughout the day, opening us to the grace-filled moments in life we too often miss as we rush past them. We discover how God reveals Godself to us in scripture and in the stories of our faith and life. We listen to the words of Jesus calling us to love God and to love our neighbor, to feed the hungry, care for the poor, the sick, the widow and those on the margins. We do not worry. We do not fear. We do not seek revenge. We forgive others. We rejoice in the Lord always. We look for the truth. We live in the light.

I need to end with an honest confession—I am not one who has ever liked to be molded and formed. Ask my parents first and they'll tell you. More than once I have brazenly and stubbornly gone my own way and done my own thing, to my own peril, I sadly admit to you. Like obstinate clay, I fought the hands that held me, that only wanted to help me become the beautiful creation God envisioned for me. I fought and went my own way. "How'd that work out for ya?" my snarky friends would ask me later, after the pain of my failure had subsided. "Not so good," I'd reply. "Not so good." I hate learning things the hard way.

Many of you have similar stories of such resistance in your own lives, of going down a path stubbornly just to prove you know better, when you really don't. Many of us have done this, as individuals—and we are capable of doing it as a

people, as a congregation, as well. We can fight against the warm and strong and patient hands of God, insisting that we know better who we need to be and how we need to get where we think we need to go. Or we can rest gently in God's hands and go where God calls us to go and become who God forms us to be.

In the end, one way leads to light and life and a beautiful, fully-formed creation. Why, then, would we choose anything else? Why, indeed.

Be our potter, God. Help us to be your clay.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Jane Williams molding clay during the sermon.

Photo by John Fricks

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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