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Alexandria, VA 22310
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Jeremiah 18:1–11
Luke 14:25–33

WORKING IN CLAY

When we were reading the Jeremiah passage about the instructions to Jeremiah—even though it's autobiographical—it's clear that God is leading Jeremiah down to the potter's house for a purpose. The Hebrew word "potting," is the same as preparing for forming, or for shaping. It's the word which describes for Jeremiah the meaning of scripture.

Scripture forms us, shapes us, just like God's shapes our hearts, just as God's spirit brings understanding for this word. We are the clay in the potter's hands—that is what God says, isn't it, to Jeremiah, "Just as the potter does with the clay, can't I do the same with you, O house of Israel?" I wonder if we would be courageous enough to go down to the potter's house with Jeremiah. All of our lives we've been told that the church is here to bring about change. And yet every time we go into a committee meeting, every time we gather to govern ourselves, what we experience is that the church is about not changing—or at least, not very radically.

And yet, imagine being there by Jeremiah and watching the dynamic way in which that clay is manipulated. It's always sad when I see the pot almost finished, and the wheel is turned and the hands of the artist working so diligently; and suddenly it seems without warning, everything gets caved in and re-kneaded and the artist starts over. He felt something imperceptible to me. He says something that I missed. And yet, that's the process, isn't it, over and over and over again? The master smoothes and lifts out the image that is there. The potter removes blemishes and imperfections, working and re-working, shaping and molding, coaxing, if you will, a new form.

Okay, I want you to be honest now and I want you to participate. This isn't rhetorical. All of you who have ever thrown a pot, even in kindergarten, raise your hand. Now I want you who raised your hands to answer the next question. (It's the same one asked during the children's sermon.) What is the most important action in forming a pot? "Being careful at the end." "Moisture." "Right mix of sand and clay." "Spinning wheel." The pot must be centered, because if it isn't in the center as the wheel turns, everything gets out of balance and, in essence, the pot self-destructs.

I'm proud that when I asked about throwing a pot, none of my family members poked each other. When you think about it, there's another way to think about throwing a pot, but we don't endorse domestic violence.

What does it mean for us to be sinners? If we are going to be God's clay—and we are, inevitably—what do we have to do to be centered? The potter promises to center us if only we will stop resisting. The potter promises to take us and put us right there and re-work us to keep us malleable and moist, if you will. The potter comes to us and says, "Your center is in the cross of Christ, the very thing that you may be trying to avoid.

Your center is intrusting that I, the potter, will help you make the choices that are beautiful. The choices that will shape who you become.”

The other New Testament reading we had for today was Philemon. I didn't include that passage in the beginning of the week because I didn't see the connection between owning a slave and treating him as a brother and the whole idea of being remade in the image of God. But that Luke passage says the choices we are offered will be expensive. And they will be hard choices. So again I ask you: What constitutes your center? Is it God's unmerited and unconditional commitment to you? Is that center coming out of your experience in God's Word, day in and day out?

You see, if we are not in God's Word, we cannot be centered. We will get completely out of balance with our own pride and understanding. If you go back and read the Jeremiah passage, in the latter part of the verses, it's very clear that if we aren't centered, there is self-destruction on the horizon. But when we are—where life is in balance the way Christ describes it—our words become more valuable than what we can possess. Because God's Spirit has taken such control that our lives have new intentions. Our longings are changed forever, and we are responding to the working of God's hands in us. If we are centered on scripture, we'll be driven to our knees, to repentance.

When we hear Christ say, “Take up your cross and follow me,” we will understand that the greatest cross we can bear is forgiveness—forgiveness within our home, within our world, within this community. When we are centered in scripture, worship can't be bland any longer. It's vital; every scripture permeates us, and we know that word is for us. And when we greet one another and the “Ritual of Friendship” is lived out, it's not just about saying, “Hi, how are ya? Good to see you.” It's about genuine extension of who we are for one another.

We talked about it a few weeks ago—about the way some people in this church when they are listening to us, it's like we're the only people in the world. And we look forward to seeing them. And it's consistent, isn't it? That person is always that way. They're not in and out of season.

The session is studying a book where there is discussion about some of the other essentials that come out of being centered, like never ceasing to stop growing—but that growth isn't just random, it's intentional. It always leads to service and to extravagant generosity.

Yes, this morning we've learning again that God is the potter, here to fix where we are broken, heal where we are wounded, cleanse where we are defiled and impure. God is the potter bringing joy where we are bitter. God is the potter filtering out all the distractions and all the wrong-headed pride, the weakness that we allow to become part of our commitment to one another.

Do you know the big question facing people now is not whether or not to go to church. They've pretty much decided whether they are going to go to church. The big question now is whether or not they are going to join a church. After all, it's just easier if we don't have to identify with all that happens over time when a church gets out of balance.

Okay, you answered about what is the most important thing when you are throwing a pot on a wheel. Now I want to know what the three most important phrases you want to hear in life? "I love you." "You're forgiven." And the third? "Supper's ready." You laugh, but think about everything we do here and the extravagant abundance of God's table. The love and nurture leads us to being centered in the Word and taking us to our needs.

Jeremiah. Come down to the potter's house and watch for a while. Amen.