

Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter

Jeremiah 18:1-6

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We really can't get into a good discussion about the possible meanings and implications of this Old Testament passage from the prophet Jeremiah, commonly known as 'The Potter and the Clay,' until we address a more basic question. It may sound simple, but it's not.

This question, by the way, actually applies to any and all discussions of biblical interpretation – and of theology, for that matter. What would be your answer to: **What is God like?** In other words: **What is the nature and character of the God you believe in?**

I realize that this is a highly individualistic question – something the Bible, for the most part, isn't as concerned about as the question, 'What is the nature and character of the God that we, as the people of God, believe in.' But in our day and age, and I think rightly so, **religious institutions, and clergy themselves, no longer speak with the level of authority concerning what "we" believe anymore.**

For let's be honest. No matter how I try to summarize what scholars basically think the ancient Hebrew people believed about God, or what traditional orthodox Christianity has to say, or Presbyterians after the Reformation, or even progressive Presbyterians today, I know darn well that **it truly is a case of what it is YOU believe about God that affects how you interpret and apply biblical stories to your own journey of faith.**

And as we approach the Season of Lent this week, a time of intentional self-reflection, I encourage you to continue to ask yourself that question, "What do I believe about the nature and character of God?"

There is perhaps an even a broader perspective and understanding of God right here in this congregation than most realize. And that's a good thing. Just earlier this morning in the Adult church school class, we completed the 21st and final session in our Progressive Christianity curriculum, which is entitled *Living the Questions*. The very title itself indicates that **a life of faith should be one guided not by attitudes and positions of absolute certainty, but rather by living in the tension caused by embracing mystery.**

That doesn't mean, however, that each and every one doesn't carry around in our own hearts and minds what it is we believe about God *today*. Most likely that is not the exact same understanding of God that we held when we were children, or last decade, or perhaps even last month. And for many of us, what we understand about God today may not be what we believe in the future.

It's true, **members and friends of this congregation fall across many points along the theological spectrum.** For instance, I know that there are those here who strongly believe in a very personal God, one they can communicate directly with, as if with another person. Many operate primarily with a "God out there" perception, that carries with it an understanding that God is watching over all things and can decide, when God so chooses, to enter into our world, and into our lives.

Others believe in a divine being that created all things, but *doesn't* interact in any way with that creation. Yet others don't believe in a theistic God at all, but rather understand God not a personal being, but as an impersonal force or presence of some kind; like a force of good, a force of love, a force drawing all things into peace and unity – a force or presence that basically comes not from without, but from within all things. And yes, even though all these characterizations are admittedly broad and over-generalized, **many of us find ourselves believing in elements of all of the above to some extent.**

The point is that it does indeed matter what it is you believe about God when engaging not only in Bible study, but even in how you interact with yourself, other people, and the world on a daily basis.

All this, I believe, is a necessary introduction before we can effectively look at today's Old Testament story of the **Potter and the Clay**. That's because this particular analogy **presupposes that God does interact with humanity**. Therefore, if that is not your presupposition concerning God, no discussion based on this biblical text will probably fit with your theological perspective.

Nevertheless, this particular Old Testament text from Jeremiah 18 seeks to address the question: **How, and to what extent, does God interact with creation?** The passage even goes on to touch on the question of why God does so.

The prophet Jeremiah uses metaphorical language to present the image of God as a potter, and the people of God as clay that is formed and reformed, in the following specific way: as clay in the potter's hands yields to the will and purpose of the potter, so God shapes Israel to God's liking and purposes. Admittedly, this is a rather strong and straightforward assertion of the **sovereignty of God** – the supreme and absolute power, autonomy and authority of God.

For those who are still on board with this particular understanding of God (which by the way was a hallmark of John Calvin's theology), a next logical question would be: What does that mean for each one of us? A traditional answer often given from a Christian perspective, and yes, a **traditional Presbyterian perspective** is this: **We, as the people of God, are being worked, molded, shaped and stretched by the hands of a divine power both outside our existence, and from within by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.** The big theological words for this are the **transcendence** of God, and the **imminence** of God.

Yet, Jeremiah's observation that suggests that we are like clay in the master potter's hands does not mean that we are likened to some shapeless lump, entirely at the mercy of the artist's hand. Biblical commentator Dennis Bratcher warns, "Often readers stop here with this image, and conclude by analogy that humanity is only passive clay in the potter's hands, powerless to affect the design of the potter and helpless to alter the outcome." He is correct, for ultimately, that is not an accurate biblical portrayal of God. For this would turn us into nothing more than puppets, and God into a divine marionette. Therefore, we must be wary (at least from a progressive perspective) of the claims that *all* things happen for a divine reason.

When we look closely at this passage from Jeremiah, we learn that contrary to a metaphor of a potter and *passive* clay, the prophet indicates that the clay itself plays an active role in what is created. **God has created us in such a way that we have free will and freedom of choice. We share, therefore, in how we are shaped.** So the level to which we, as clay, are gritty or smooth, malleable or stiff, refined or flecked with imperfections, contributes to how we will turn out. So perhaps an important question for

many is: **Are you willing to trust that God, with all your flecks, flaws, and failures, can make something of beauty out of you.**

And since this biblical passage addresses the issue not from an individualistic perspective, but a corporate one, all this needs to be applied to us, together, as the people of God, and more specifically to us as a congregation. The issue in the Book of Jeremiah, is whether Israel will become what God intends, or whether they will choose to reject God's purposes. Their decisions, therefore, as to which way to proceed in life make a difference. And I believe that our decisions, in our personal lives and as a congregation, matter as well – especially as they relate to allowing God's purposes to work out in the world through us and our ministry efforts.

This leads to one more aspect of the metaphor of the potter and clay that I want to address. **Clay is workable only until it is fired or dries. After that it can no longer be shaped as the potter desires.** If we read further in the Jeremiah passage, we learn that he warns that by its stubbornness and continued rebellion, Israel was reaching the stage of a 'fired pot' that would be destroyed if it did not turn from its evil ways – in other words, repent. While we have to be careful not to carry this metaphor too far, Jeremiah makes a good point.

God can mold and shape us (if you believe God can and does so) only if we remain open to being molded, shaped and re-shaped. **Once we become hard-hearted, unwilling to bend, yield, or change in any way, it's hard for us to fulfill God's intentions for us** – either as individuals, as a congregation, or even as a denomination. **That's a primary argument for not becoming so dogmatic and absolute in one's understanding of God.**

So the question remains: Will you and I, will we, allow God to shape and rework us (in those places in our hearts and minds that need to be shaped and reworked) in order to more fully be fashioned into God's intentions for us? Those intentions include living a life marked by love, compassion, fairness, equality, justice, fairness, and grace. One biblical commentator summarizes it this way:

It can happen, if we allow the Potter to do the one, single most important part of creating a work of beauty: **centering the clay on the wheel.** If the clay is not centered, the centrifugal forces will cause the clay to explode and splatter into a huge mess. Trusting God is to allow ourselves to be centered in the will of God, allowing God to take the raw material we give God and slowly but inexorably fashion it into a vessel of both usefulness and beauty.

So as you continue to reflect upon your understanding of the nature and character of God, I want to leave you with the words of one of my favorite hymns - words that at least still fit my current theological perspective. [Words by Frances Iverson]:

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

And I would add, on us.
Amen