

Sermon for September 6, 2010
Jeremiah 18

My senior year of high school I had taken all of my required credits, and I was looking for an easy elective. I went down the list of available classes and saw a class called “ceramics”. I knew this meant lots of time working with clay. I figured that wasn’t so hard. I signed up.

When I got to class I loved watching others working on the ceramics wheel. A lifeless piece of clay could turn into a magnificent piece of art, seemingly with little effort. It looked so easy to turn the everyday into something extraordinary.

Then I tried it. And my pieces of clay didn’t turn into beautiful pots so much as they turned into muddy, lopsided messes. Around the time I realized that we were actually graded on our artistic merit, I decided my future was not in ceramics class.

Today’s passage from Jeremiah talks a lot about the idea of pottery, and the potter’s wheel. Jeremiah is told to go and see the potter at his house. There he watches the artist work, creating first a pot that was no good. But instead of taking the clay and throwing it out, the potter just reworks it into something else. And in the end, a useful vessel is created.

There are few things in life that we can rework so easily as clay. If you miscut a piece of wood, you cannot undo that. Or if you crush a piece of metal, it’s rare that you can restore it so that it doesn’t show its damage somewhere. But clay is more forgiving.

One of the first sermons I heard in seminary was by a pastor who was also a potter. He sat at the front of the chapel and preached on this text as he was working on potter’s wheel. We watched awed as he created a beautiful pot before our eyes. But then, suddenly, he said something to the effect of, “But this clay is also so fragile, and we can lose what we have created so easily.” And then he crushed the pot between his hands.

You could here a gasp. It had been beautiful, and now it was nothing. But, quickly, he worked the clay again and created something even more beautiful on the wheel. By the time he was done preaching, he had shown us creation, deconstruction, and reconstruction in this incredible, tangible way.

It’s no secret what God is suggesting here with the clay references. Human beings, like clay, are both fragile and yet completely capable of being reworked again and again. Like clay, we take on new forms. Some are good. Some are not so good. Some start off the right way but grow lopsided with time. Others have shaky, uneven starts but smooth themselves out into stable vessels. Human beings, like clay, are capable of incredible acts of re-creation.

Sometimes we are shaped, as this text suggests, by the hands of a loving God. We are slowly worked into useful, beautiful works of art. We work with the potter's hands to be what the potter wants us to be.

But sometimes, we are shaped not by God, but by the other influences in our life. Instead of the sure and steady hands of love, we allow ourselves to be shaped by fear. We let ourselves be crafted by anxiety. We find reason to be re-created by greed or a desire for something we are not. And slowly, over time, we become lopsided. And then we collapse. We are, indeed, fragile like that.

At the time that Jeremiah was writing the people had become like those vessels that start out on the wheel as strong and beautiful. Yet, over time, they had become shaped by other hands than God's. They had grown unsteady and were in danger of collapse.

God is not happy with the people in this passage, and yet God is not done with them. God is not leaving them there on the wheel alone. God is not allowing them to just collapse in among themselves. Instead, God is reclaiming God's rightful place as the potter; the one who shapes the clay into what it is supposed to be.

Some artists have told me that when they start to work with their chosen medium, be it clay or wood or anything else, they sometimes have a sense of what it "wants" to be. They have a sense of the art that is already there, wanting to be brought out and wanting to be brought into that form.

The same is often true with us. We were created to be something incredible. We were given a direction in which to go, and a way in which to be crafted. We were made as something that is special and beautiful.

In the Psalm we read today, 139, we hear that God has loved us before we were even on this earth. God loved us and created us, carefully and lovingly making us into ourselves. Giving us the best of all gifts. Hoping that we will find these things in ourselves and be formed by them.

We are, like the clay or wood that knows what it wants to be, at some level aware of who we should become. We know, at some level, what we are supposed to turn into. And we want to choose to be crafted in the right potter's hands. And, though that choice is sometimes hard, we really do try.

But we have free will. And we are not perfect. And sometimes we allow ourselves to become lopsided and to collapse. And it is in those times that we know we have a God who will pick us up again off the wheel, and shape us into something new. We have a God who will craft us into what we truly were meant to become.

One of the ways this happens is in the sacraments. This is a rare day today. It's a day in which we celebrate both of the sacraments of our church: baptism and communion. This doesn't happen often since we don't celebrate communion every week. But today we will be baptizing Kiera Murphy and we will then be celebrating communion.

Kiera, like all who are baptized, no matter what their age, was created to be good. She was created by a God who loves her, who has given her certain strengths and certain gifts, and who will shape who throughout her life. This day is one in which we acknowledge that bond and we pledge as a congregation, and on behalf of the church universal, to help Kiera in her journey.

And in the act of baptism, Kiera is officially understood by us to be God's child. She is strengthened in this act and received further the grace of God. This is a holy, joyous occasion. It is a significant shaping of her by the potter's hands. And it will inform her whole life.

After the baptism we will be celebrating Holy Communion together. Here we will all be shaped by God, as clay is by the potter. We will be fed by grace and strengthened by our connection to Christ and to one another and to those Christians of all times and places.

The sacraments are often tools of the potter's wheel. And when we receive them, we grow steadier and stronger and begin to take on our true shape in new and incredible ways.

As we go on in our service today, and prepare to both witness Kiera's baptism and receive Holy Communion, we do so knowing that we are being reshaped. We may be clay, but we are clay with purpose. We are clay with potential. We are clay that is meant to be formed into what is beautiful and useful.

If you've ever known anyone who has turned around their lives, you know a lot about the resilience of clay. A friend of mine got into a lot of trouble as a high school student. So much so that he was involved in the juvenile justice system at times. At the age of 14, or so, it looked like he was going no where fast.

We met in college, where I didn't know this for a long time. By the time I found out, I knew he was well on his way to redemption. After college we lost touch, but recently I found him again on Facebook. His picture shows him smiling, happy with his children, and wearing a doctor's white lab coat.

I tell you his story because he's one of the many people I know who have been shaped by the potter's hands into their true selves. He's one who grew tired of always resisting the gentle reworking of a God who loves us, and instead worked with the potter. He's one whose clay had been formed into a pot that wouldn't hold water, and which fell, but which rose back up again to be a thing of strength and purpose.

For most of us it may not seem that dramatic, but for all of us it is true. In those times when we feel ourselves flat against the wheel, we are simply about to be built back up. In those times when we find ourselves about to receive the sacraments, we are about to be strengthened. And in those times when we find ourselves face to face with the potter, we know we are about to finally become what we've known we were created to be all along. Amen.