

## ***“In God’s Hands”***

**Sunday, September 4, 2016**

**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

 **(Jeremiah 18:1-11, MSG)**

**1-2** GOD told Jeremiah, *“Up on your feet! Go to the potter’s house. When you get there, I’ll tell you what I have to say.”*

**3-4** So I went to the potter’s house, and sure enough, the potter was there, working away at his wheel. Whenever the pot the potter was working on turned out badly, as sometimes happens when you are working with clay, the potter would simply start over and use the same clay to make another pot.

**5-10** Then GOD’s Message came to me: *“Can’t I do just as this potter does, people of Israel?”*  
GOD’s Decree! *“Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel. At any moment I may decide to pull up a people or a country by the roots and get rid of them. But if they repent of their wicked lives, I will think twice and start*

*over with them. At another time I might decide to plant a people or country, but if they don't cooperate and won't listen to me, I will think again and give up on the plans I had for them.*

<sup>11</sup> *“So, tell the people of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem my Message: ‘Danger! I’m shaping doom against you, laying plans against you. Turn back from your doomed way of life. Straighten out your lives.’”*

**This is the Word of God for the people of God.**

***Thanks be to God.***

**[2<sup>nd</sup> Service: Affirmation of Faith]**

**[MESSAGE]**

We are accustomed to images of God as ruler and judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father and mother.

Jeremiah invites us also to see God as an *artist*.

This is not a new image.

Genesis shows us God who is designer, Creator, and poet.

God fashions, divides, and landscapes the universe.

We may imagine God as a Potter who sculpts  
humanity from the primeval mud of the earth;  
God shapes this being and breathes life into it.

Jeremiah suggests that the clay of our making was  
never “*fired*” and remains pliable.

Therefore, God is not finished with us just yet.

**Let us pray...**Lord, we ask that you might help us  
remain pliable in your hands. Lead us into your  
Word this morning in Jesus’ name. Amen.

If you have ever worked with clay, you understand  
what happens when it is fired.

The potter molds and shapes the clay into  
something beautiful and functional – a bowl, or  
a plate, or a pitcher.

When the piece is complete it is fired in a 2,000  
degree oven.

The result is a permanent, yet breakable, ceramic.

The clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens  
into something designed for a single purpose.

Clay that has not been fired remains pliable; it may be shaped and re-shaped infinitely.

In Jeremiah 18, God does not simply shape us once and for always.

Though God molded human beings from the clay and breathed life into us, God did not “*fire*” the clay, leaving us permanently designed for a single purpose.

God can and **does** shape and re-shape us in response to our strengths, weaknesses, and flaws.

***God is not finished with us yet.***

This idea that God works **with** us and **through** us to shape and improve us is not unfamiliar.

It is a concept we encounter more than once in Scripture.

**But, there is never a report that the Lord will re-shape us into something other than what the Potter, the Creator intends.**

When re-shaping comes, it will be the means for recreating people into what God desires and plans.

Does this imply that God has everything all planned out with no room for choice?

**NO** – It means that God can work with our choices.

The central message of this passage is that people – *as individuals and communities* – need to change some behaviors.

God is working here to convince Israel that they need to change or God will change his mind about how to deal with them.

The change Jeremiah calls for is a turning away from evil and towards God's design for Creation.

It is a challenging call that requires us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with each other.

Discernment of this call causes us to ask:

- Is the Lord threatening to re-shape me?
- Where am I being called to change and how quickly?
- What do I need to do to allow God to re-shape me?
- Do I trust God enough to really put ALL of my life in God's hands?

I want us to notice how messy the Potter's hands are in the bulletin cover graphic.

When we turn our messy lives over to God, God is willing to get his hands dirty – *that's a good thing*.

It is a blessing that God is willing to do the hard, restorative work of re-shaping the flawed clay that is **us**.

God is able to view us completely and objectively working with our strengths and re-shaping our flaws.

The process, however, requires that we are willing to remain pliable.

This text may also trouble us because it presents a God who can change his mind.

We've been taught that God remains faithful and steadfast; never changing.

We're not accustomed to thinking that God might say something and then take it back.

Once God makes a decision, we imagine he made the right choice.

What's worse, Jeremiah shows us God who says: *"I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I'm working out a plan against you."*

*Say what?! God is plotting against the Israelites to bring them harm?*

Haven't we learned that God would never cause us deliberate harm?

We need to unpack this a bit and try to hear what Jeremiah is telling us.

First, let's talk about the harm thing.

What's really going on here is that God is promising – ***not threatening*** – judgement on the Israelites unless they repent and turn back to him.

This is not out of character, nor is it surprising.

From this perspective we can see God who would change his mind about judgement and

punishment because we have seen this behavior before.

So, Jeremiah's wording may take us by surprise, but he really is not telling us anything new.

**God doesn't change, but he may choose to relent.**

In the course of NOT CHANGING, God changes the way he relates to his people.

How God relates to us changes over time depending on who God needs *us* to be in any given generation.

We must understand that the purpose of God's judgement is to engender change in human behavior.

That's what Jeremiah is trying to get the people to see.

AND – this is a dynamic relationship.

The Potter is not indifferent to the condition of the clay.

God is not indifferent to us and how things are with us at any given moment.



The Potter works with the clay to discover the best way to shape it and is able to work around or excise flaws.

God is able to work with us in the same way.

Jeremiah also seems to imply that the clay itself may resist the Potter's hand.

We can choose to give-in to God's re-shaping or resist and pursue our self-centered agenda.

Finally, I want us to imagine how all of this leads us recognize that no matter how messy life gets or how much we resist, **we are in God's hands**,

 **Clay work is messy.**

If we are going to cooperate with the Potter and participate in the art of molding and shaping, we too can expect to get our hands dirty.

There will be risks and there will be broken pottery.

At the end of the day, the Potter steps away from the wheel covered with the stuff of molding and making art.

We – *the clay* – may groan from the strain of being shaped, but we rest in the knowledge we've been in God's hands all along.

Ultimately, we **hope** in the reality that God became clay with us to express the Potter's own heart and will.

**In spite of the mess, it's good to be in God's hands.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**