

We're in the midst of 9 weeks of Old Testament readings from the prophet Jeremiah.

It's sometimes difficult to hear what Jeremiah has to say since his cultural context is so different from ours. After all, 7,000 miles and 2,600 years separate us.

Plus, their problems seem so different from ours. The chief spiritual problems in Jeremiah's time were idolatry and paganism. The people of God worshipped other gods in place of, or in addition to, the God of Israel. This kind of worship is sometimes difficult for us 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to identify with.

And yet, as 21st century people, we still have the same problem our ancient ancestors had with idolatry and paganism. We're a bit more subtle. We put a better veneer over it. But, as I've said before, we still worship the same false gods our ancient ancestors worshipped.

We still worship Dionysius, the god of pleasure. We fill our lives with creature comforts. We drug ourselves with various mood-altering substances. We live by the motto, "If it feels good, do it."

We worship Nike, the goddess of victory. We want to come out on top, to be #1. We live by the motto, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

We worship Mars, the god of war. I'm not just talking about warfare between nations. I'm talking about the way we use our power or position to get force others to do things our way. We live by the motto, "My way or the highway."

We worship Aphrodite, the goddess of love. We're one of the most sex-saturated cultures of all time. We live by the motto, "Obey your thirst."

We worship Mammon, the god of possessions. We accumulate an inordinate amount of stuff. We live by the motto, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

Now, there's nothing inherently evil about any of these things: success, sex, power, pleasure, possessions. There are all gifts from God, and they are all meant to be used within proper boundaries.

They can all become spiritually dangerous, however, when they become ends in themselves. And these things can even become downright evil if they become central the central focus of our lives. We can all too easily find ourselves seeking and trusting these things, to the exclusion of the living God. And that is paganism. That is idolatry. That is following after false Gods.

So maybe we need to hear and heed God's message to us. Maybe we need to listen to the words of Jeremiah. And our Old Testament lesson for today is a great place to do so. This is one of most famous passages in Jeremiah.

God tells Jeremiah to go visit a potter's shop. Jeremiah does so, where he sees the potter working the clay on his pottery wheel. And there, Jeremiah sees something pretty ordinary: "The vessel (the potter) was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."<sup>1</sup>

That's what potters do. If a pot is not working out, the potter can mash it down into a lump and start over again. Maybe the clay is too dry. Maybe it's not mixed well. Maybe the walls of the pot have gotten too thin.

But as long as the pot has not yet been fired, as long as it remains moist and pliable clay, the potter can shape it and reshape it again and again.

Then God gives Jeremiah the spiritual message: "Can I not do with you... just as this potter has done? ...just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand."<sup>2</sup>

The potter has the right to reshape his pots. God claims the same right over his handiwork. God claims the right to reshape people, and even nations.

It works two ways: God says through Jerimiah, "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it."<sup>3</sup>

The term translated, "change my mind" is actually the word for sigh. If things are going badly, and there is a change, if there is repentance, the implication is that God breathes a sigh of relief.

But it also works the other direction. God says, "At another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, if things go from good to bad, God again sighs, presumably this time with sadness.

The message here is that God is claiming the right to move to plan B. God is reserving the right to mash down the clay that's not working out. God is also reserving the right remold and reshape the clay that at first didn't look very promising, fashioning it into something better.

That's all very well and good in theory. But we're not talking about abstractions. We're talking about human lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Jer 18:2-4

<sup>2</sup> Jer 18:6

<sup>3</sup> Jer 18:7-8

<sup>4</sup> Jer 18:9-10

What does it feel like when you're the one being mashed down and reshaped? Usually it's not a pleasant experience. No one likes being mashed down. Usually, no one would choose to be reshaped and remolded.

And I would also say personally that the times in my life when God has been mashing on me were not pleasant experiences.

And yet, in retrospect, with hindsight, I can look back and say, "Oh, that's what you were doing. That's why you were pushing and prodding that way." It's not been easy for me to see God's hand while I'm actually being remolded and remodeled. But with hindsight, I can look back and perceive God's hand at work.

We have an interesting paradox here. We have clay that is fashioned by the potter. But we also have a potter who is willing to change his mind based upon how the clay is acting. God is in charge as creator. Yet God also responds to the free choices of his creation.

We have freedom of choice. We can obstinately refuse to be molded by our creator. We can refuse to listen. We can refuse to be affected by his touch. We can dig in our heels and refuse to change. We have the choice as to whether we allow God to shape us.

Part of my spiritual growth has been not only to begin to learn to recognize God's hands in retrospect. It has also been learning to trust God during those periods when I'm being shaped and molded. It's a matter of learning to say to God, "I trust what you've done in the past. So, I have to you trust even more when I'm feeling mashed and pushed and prodded by your hands." It's a choice I have to make, to allow God to mold and fashion me more and more.

And when you think of God's nature, it's hard to imagine a more loving potter.

Think about it. Our potter not only has the power to fashion the clay. He made the clay. He made us.

He made clay that has the power to complain. He made clay that has the power to resist him.

What kind of potter would do that?

If I were making the clay and making the pot with it, I'd want the clay to sit there, be quiet, and do what I would want it to do. I wouldn't want clay that would squirm, or complain, or jump off the potter's wheel, or absolutely refuse to be shaped.

And yet, God gives us all of those choices. What amazing love that is, to create us with that kind of freedom.

What kind of clay are you? Are you the kind that refuses God's touch? Do you place your trust elsewhere? Do you trust in things like success, power, pleasure, possessions? Or, can

you place your trust in the living God? Can you trust him enough to allow him into your life?  
Can you give yourself over to his power to mold and shape you?

Our master potter has the power to change you. He invites you to put your life in his hands.

Can you respond with the words we sang?

*Have thine own way, Lord!*

*Have thine own way!*

*Thou art the potter,*

*I am the clay!*

*Mold me and make me*

*After thy will,*

*While I am waiting,*

*Yielded and still.*