

“Something Beautiful”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 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. And 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. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. (Jeremiah 18:1-11)

What tough lessons to have on this beautiful late summer holiday weekend! Jeremiah announces that Israel is like a clay pot forming in the hands of God, who is about to decide whether or not he should break it down and start again. Jesus proclaims that if we want to be his disciples, we should hate our fathers and mothers and spouses and children and brothers and sisters, and even life itself. These are hard sayings, tough talk.

Listening to Jeremiah, it seems that there is nothing we can do. We are nothing but a lump of clay in the potter's hands. Everything in our lives is already determined, or is being determined by something or someone else, and we do not have any control or any power over it. This is depressing, isn't it?

While Jeremiah sounds depressing, Jesus is demanding. Give up all our possessions, all our plans, all our people, the dearest ones to us? This is too much! These texts may be appropriate for a study during Lent, but then only if deemed absolutely necessary, but not for a church trying to reach people where they are – in the middle of the Labor Day weekend, trying to wring a few more relaxing days before the fall arrives in full swing.

Yet, these are the texts put before us today. And if we are reading them today, it is not simply because we are a rule-abiding and lectionary-respecting people. We could have well chosen some other texts that sound easier, less demanding, and more encouraging. I confess, at first reading, that was what I wanted to do – to skip them and

choose different passages for our lesson today. However, in my struggle, in my confusion, in my disorientation, I found myself being reoriented. Yes, these texts are difficult and demanding, and yet, at the same time, I found them profoundly comforting and encouraging.

In our first lesson, God is described as a potter having the power or sovereignty over the clay. You know? A potter can do what he wants with the clay. If a molded pot is spoiled, blemished, or simply not up to his expectations, he can destroy it and start it all over. In verses 6 and 7, God declares, *“Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand. At one moment, I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it.”*

These verses clearly state God’s sovereignty. Yes, God does have total power to review and enact the fate of people and nations. Yet, in verse 8, God continues, *“but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from evil, I will change my mind.”*

You see? Yes, God is sovereign. God has power over the history of people and nations. Yet, that does not mean that God controls and decides everything that happens in a way that cannot be changed. That does not mean that God has all the power, and we do not, in a way that our choices do not matter, our actions do not matter. The sovereignty of God takes in account the human way. The sovereignty of God responds to human situation. God’s control over the history of nations and people is not a willy-nilly determinism that is set from the beginning, unilaterally and irrevocably.

In verse 4, we read, *“The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”* Here, the point is neither the passivity of the clay, nor the power of the potter to simply destroy it. The potter realizes that the work in her hands has gone wrong, as sometimes happens when you work with clay. Yet, rather than throw out the clay, the potter works and reworks the clay into something good, something useful and beautiful.

I find this story deeply comforting. This story is about getting another chance. This story is about getting it right. No, God will never give up on me. All my confusions, doubts, mistakes, and shortcomings, I just need to offer them all to God, who will work and rework me to make something beautiful of my life. No, God will never give up on me. No, God will never give up on this world. In a constant and dynamic process, God will continue to work to shape and reshape my life, our lives, into something good and beautiful. We’d better let God work on us. We’d better let God change us, mold us, and make us into the vessel God intends us to be.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus calls us for a whole new orientation to life, where one’s life is seen not in one’s possessions or accomplishments, nor in family connections, but in emptying ones’ self to be filled with God’s power and purpose. This is good news, my friends. It may not be for the fainthearted, but this is good news, my friends. It is about peace that passes all understanding. It is about joy beyond imagination. It is about freedom beyond the bounds of our intellect. It is about something good, something beautiful, which is ours to take, ours to become. It may not be for the fainthearted, but this is good news, my friends, to which all Christ’s disciples respond with a resounding AMEM!