



“Pottery Lessons”

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Jeremiah 18:1-11 (NRSV)***

Those who know me well know that I am not the most artistic person that they have ever met, but I am a great admirer of those who are, and am pleased to be part of a community that celebrates all of us as God’s works of art and as artists in our own right, regardless of how talented we may be perceived to be.

Like many of you, I suspect, my most prolific artistic period so far in life has been that span of time between the ages of 5 and 12, when my parents, church, and school seemed particularly aware of the benefits that art offers for children’s intellectual and spiritual formation.

Art class and craft time were among my favorite parts of school and church as a child. I especially remember my elementary art teacher. I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t remember her name, even though I remember a lot about her.

I grew up in rural Iowa. As you may imagine, small farming communities beget small schools, which beget small classes, and in turn, small faculties. So it was with the Albert City–Truesdale Community School District. We had one art teacher and one music teacher for the entire district—Kindergarten through the 12th grade. Over a five-day school week, our art teacher and our music teacher had every child in class at least twice. I marvel at the thought of their challenge.

Over the course of our childhood, I, my twin sister, and our contemporaries were exposed to every art medium that could be brought into an Iowa public school classroom. We discovered our artist selves through finger painting. We explored pointillism by gluing small pieces of tissue paper to a white background using the eraser-ends of our pencils. We made mosaics out of small squares of colored construction paper. We created impressionist paintings with our watercolors. We learned about other cultures through their weaving techniques. We formed small pots out of clay by hand, and fired our vessels in the school kiln. We waited impatiently for our pots to cool, and then glazed and re-glazed them as they went from the stages of greenware to bisque to fully glazed.

Art class was fun, and it was, for farm kids like me, an entrée into other worlds that we were not necessarily destined to discover by other means.

Looking back, I realize that I was fortunate to have had a broad exposure to art at a young age, and to be encouraged to explore art, even though I was not a particularly gifted artist. Exposure to and exploration of art provided me with important life lessons.

Another life lesson I learned in art class was that there was no such thing as a mistake. I remember numerous times when a classmate would shriek or sulk about an art project that had gotten “messed up,” and our teacher would come to the student’s side, study the project, inquire what the matter was, and pronounce to the entire class in a loud voice, “People, in art there is no such thing as a mistake. If something happens with your art that wasn’t planned, or that you don’t like, work with it. Incorporate it into the piece.”

My piano teacher offered similar advice about mistakes in my repertoire. She said, “Being a great pianist,” she would say, “was as much or more about how well you recover from a mistake, as how well you can play all the other notes.”

So, you see, I learned several important lessons about life through art and music, and I hope you did too. Paramount among the life lessons I learned was how to cope successfully with surprises, difficulties, and mistakes, especially my own.

Looking back, I think that at least part of the reason that these art lessons were so salient for me was that they resonated with the church school lessons that I was learning about grace.

II

Growing up in Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, in Albert City, Iowa, I learned about grace through the behavior of my pastor and teachers, and the theology of the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who taught that grace is a gift of God. We cannot earn it. We may not deserve it. God offers it anyway. We are invited to receive it.

Luther didn’t invent this theology of grace. He based it on significant themes and stories in the Bible, particularly in the ancient prophetic literature, like Jeremiah, and the New Testament gospels and epistles. Today’s scripture reading from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah is such an example.

Jeremiah was a prophet from a priestly tribe who lived in the final years of the Judean kingdom (the Southern Kingdom of Ancient Israel.) The prophet’s home territory was located near the capital city, Jerusalem, which was seized by the Babylonians in 587 BCE.

For twenty-five years prior to the fall of Judah, Jeremiah repeatedly issued prophecies calling Judah to repentance from their reliance on foreign armies, hollow worship, and divergence from the Law.

Jeremiah’s efforts were futile. The nation fell, and the prophet was left to mourn the destruction of his nation and to watch the Jewish elite be marched off to Babylon and the few remaining flee to Egypt.¹

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Jeremiah#Contents

Modern biblical scholars refer to Jeremiah's prophecy in chapter 18, verses 1 through 11, as a "prophecy of doom." It was one of his many calls to repentance that Judah failed to heed.

So doom was definitely the mood of Jeremiah's prophecy from the potter's shop. But doom was not his only intention or his last word on Judah.

If we give this passage a close read, and study it within its larger literary and historical context, we discover that Jeremiah's prophecy from the potter's shop is imbued with the promise of hope, which is eventually fulfilled.

These themes of doom and hope are commingled in verse 4 of the passage. Alluding to God as a potter, Jeremiah says, "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."

On the one hand, Jeremiah says that Israel is doomed, because they are not right with God, and will be thrown back in the clay vat like flawed pots. But then, on the other hand, he promises that God will recreate Israel from dust.

If we read the book of Jeremiah in its entirety, we learn that both prophecies do come to pass—doom and hope. Judah is first crushed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, but they are, forty years later, redeemed by God through the Persians, who liberated them from Babylon, so that the captives and refugees could return home and receive God's gift of a new covenant "written on human hearts rather than tablets of stone" (chapters 30 and 31)² and a renewed life in their homeland.

Reading on in the annals of Ancient Israel's history and the history of the early Christian Church, we see God the Potter vigorously at work, forming and reforming human hearts, lives, and relationships.

III

We don't need to be scholars of history to recognize when life doesn't work out as we planned. We need simply to examine our personal histories. I imagine that most of us can recall a time—maybe that time is now—when some part of our lives was a mess. Perhaps in those times we experienced ourselves as flawed, chipped, cracked, or worse—shattered to bits.

Perhaps we believed that we brought this destruction on ourselves. Perhaps we saw someone else as the culprit. Or perhaps our hardships were the result of an accident or tragedy that we cannot fully comprehend or explain.

Wherever we situate ourselves in this continuum of possibilities, there is a helpful, hopeful lesson emerging for us from the potter's shop. That message is similar to the one that I learned in art class and in church school. It's Jeremiah's prophecy of hope emanating from the dustbin of doom. It's the good news that God is already working in and through our

² Leo G. Perdue, "Introduction to Jeremiah" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) pp. 1111-1112.

brokenness, imagining and recreating with us the new vessels that we are becoming—vessels that are likely grander than we may yet be able to imagine.

In time, we may look back at these hard times—these “clay vat times”—in our lives with reverence. In time, we may have more appreciation for these difficulties and the effort that we, that God, that our loved ones exerted in order to help us recreate ourselves and to reform the shattered parts of our lives. I'll close with a metaphorical example that emanates from personal experience.

IV

I'm not a particularly materialistic person, but over the years, I have collected a few personal possessions that mean a great deal to me. One of those things is a ceramic cream pitcher that once belonged to my Grandma Thomsen.

The pitcher is about six inches tall, and has two simple flowers painted on the side. On the neck of the pitcher is a stamp that says: “Try Our Service, Moehler's Produce, Ph. 49, Gladbrook, Iowa.”

Moehler's was a store in my grandparents' hometown where they used to do business.

I never realized until I was older that this vessel was a cream pitcher. I thought it was a watering pitcher, because I had never seen it filled with cream. I had only seen it filled with water, and used by my Grandma for watering her African violets.

I remember, on more than one occasion, she explained that this pitcher had a long spout that was perfect for letting water flow under the leaves of her African violets. As long as Grandma was alive and I was around to watch her water house plants, she used this pitcher for watering her African violets.

It's unlikely that this pitcher has much cash value. It was a vendor giveaway, probably from the 1940s. There are a lot of them around. If you've been to Ruth Schaap's house and spent any time in her kitchen, you may have seen one just like it—only hers has the name of a vendor from Orange City, Iowa on it.

Now that you have an image of that pitcher in mind, and a sense of its importance to me, imagine my disappointment when one day a dozen years ago, or so, I was watering my own flowers with this pitcher, and slipped on the steps, and dropped and broke it.

I was devastated. I was diminished to tears. I was furious with myself. Immediately, a cacophony of voices rang in my ears. I could hear my mother scolding me for not being more careful. I could hear my late grandmother saying, “Don't worry. It wasn't worth anything anyway.” And, I could hear Stephanie saying, “Don't worry, I'll fix it.”

In a fit of grief, I said emphatically, “You can't fix it!”

Stephanie said softly, “Let me try.”

Having neither the patience nor the vision to restore the pitcher, I said, with great skepticism, “O.K.” and turned over the shards to her. That was the last I saw of the pitcher for weeks.

Then one day, while I was writing a sermon, Stephanie walked into our home office with her hands behind her back, and said as I looked up, “Now, I know it’s not the same. I know it will never hold water again, and we can throw it away if it’s too sad to keep in this shape, but I saved the pieces and glued them back together.”

There it was, Grandma’s cream pitcher, whole again.

I was deeply touched by her care and concern, and awed by her patience with me and this 100 piece three-dimensional puzzle that she had put back together. I was speechless as I turned the pitcher round and round. Finally, I think I said something like, “Wow. You did this? You did this for me?”

I was awed. She was dismissive of my compliments, and said something, like “Yah, I guess those undergraduate courses in archeology and my job in the museum lab have finally paid off.”

As I held Grandma’s pitcher in my hands and turned it around carefully, Stephanie explained again to me that we didn’t have to keep the pitcher, because it was held together with Elmer’s glue and would never hold water again.

Immediately, I said, “Of course, we’ll keep it. It may not hold water, but it can still hold memories, which is why the pitcher matters to me in the first place.”

V

When I reread Jeremiah’s piece on the potter’s shop, I was reminded of the broken pitcher and of Stephanie’s great care, and incredible patience with me—not just in that moment, but to these past 15 years—as she restored a treasured memento—and moreover has loved me through a myriad of personal and professional heartbreaks.

As it turns out, we all have them, don’t we? We all have some proverbial chips, scratches, cracks, and shards—maybe even piles of wreckage from hearts, lives, and relationship that have been smashed to smithereens.

Regardless of the source of our injury—be it self-induced, an assault from someone else, or a fluke of nature—the good news is that doom does not get the last word.

Hope lives, even at the potter’s shop. Jeremiah knew it. We are invited to hear and believe it.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: we worship a God who is perpetually helping us pick up the pieces, and work with us to form and reform our very lives and relationships into new vessels, which may be even more beautiful and useful than we can yet imagine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the Community
Sunday, Sept. 9, 2007
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Potter God,
like earthen vessels, like Adam and Eve, you created us from dust.
From dust we come, and to dust we will return.
Blessed be your name, O God.

In an earthen vat, you pour your life-giving water over
broken hearts, shattered relationships, and dashed dreams,
and our healing begins.

You stir and kneed the wreckage of our lives into cold damp clay,
and grant our weary souls much needed rest.
In the cool of the night, we prepare for a future filled with hope.

In the imagination of your heart, we are loved into new life.
By the touch of your hands, we are formed and reformed.
From the warmth of your spirit, we become bisque in the fire.
During Sabbath rest, we await fulfillment of your prophetic promises.

With the touch of your brush, our lives reveal hints of new luster.
With the work of your tools, new lines of faith are traced.
During the final firing, our true colors emerge,
and our new purpose is assured.

When at last our earthly vessels grow weary from the world's wear,
we prepare again for your redemptive journey mindful that it was
from dust that we came and to dust that we return,
as our souls fly freely to You.

Blessed be your name, Potter God. Blessed by your name. Amen.